

# Writing on the margins: graffiti in Italy

## (seventh to sixteenth centuries)

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In all modern languages, the word 'graffiti' is associated with social criticism, protest and vandalism. On the contrary, what historians call graffiti is unrelated to transgression.

Nonetheless, contemporary and ancient graffiti share one important aspect: both are public writings produced spontaneously and beyond any control from authorities. The study of ancient graffiti allows us to get access to the worldview of individuals in the past. This explains the importance of considering graffiti as a historical source worthy of being studied alongside the conventional ones.

### Graffiti as a historical source

The Graff-IT project aims to develop a new interdisciplinary approach to the study of medieval and Renaissance Italian graffiti (seventh to the sixteenth centuries) as a historical source to allow a correct contextualisation of graffiti within their space-time and social production frame. The project has several goals. First, it wants to give graffiti full dignity as written sources and asserts their study as intrinsic to the discipline of palaeography. By doing so, it also aims to overcome the atomistic approach to graffiti to identify new textualities and new languages. Another goal is to look at graffiti as a source of the history of devotional practices and signs of the socio-cultural

identity of people and places. Finally, but not less importantly, the project also aims to change our perception of historical artworks by shifting the focus from the creation stage to their social function and use over time.

The term 'graffito' is a modern invention made current in the archaeological lexicon only around the mid-nineteenth century. It derives from the Italian verb *graffiare*, 'to scratch', developed from the Latin *graphium*. Therefore, the word 'graffito' literally refers to the scratching technique of writing by means of a hard tip. However, by extended meaning, the term came to denote all forms of extemporaneous writings made on a surface not primarily intended for this purpose, regardless of the technique used. In this broad, commonly accepted definition, the focus is no longer on the writing tool but on the medium. The latter is undoubtedly an important aspect to consider, yet it does not suffice to cover the huge variety of forms of writing that may be defined as graffiti.

### The writers

Besides the material aspects of writing, another crucial factor is the status of the

writer. Those who write graffiti on a wall, using a hard tip or a self-made brush and paint, do not operate upon someone's request or on commission. In this sense, graffiti are different from most medieval written sources, which were produced to satisfy the request of a commissioner, be it a religious or secular institution or a member of the elite. All being considered, graffiti are understood as follows in the Graff-IT project: graffiti is a form of writing, sometimes mixed with figurative patterns, made on a surface not primarily designed for this purpose by means of an occasional tool, regardless of the technique used and beyond the writer's dependency on an authority.

### Marginality

Another key concept for the study of graffiti as envisaged in the Graff-IT project, relates to the term 'margin', which is charged with multiple meanings. The first one refers to both the physical space and the materiality of writing. From this viewpoint, the margin is understood as a place of encounter. The margins of book pages often contain notes left by readers, which bear witness to their personal encounters with the



Figure 1: Verona, Basilica of St. Zeno: chronicle graffiti on fourteenth century frescoes.



Figure 2: Spoleto (Perugia) — Church of St. Ponziano: graffiti on fourteenth century frescoes.

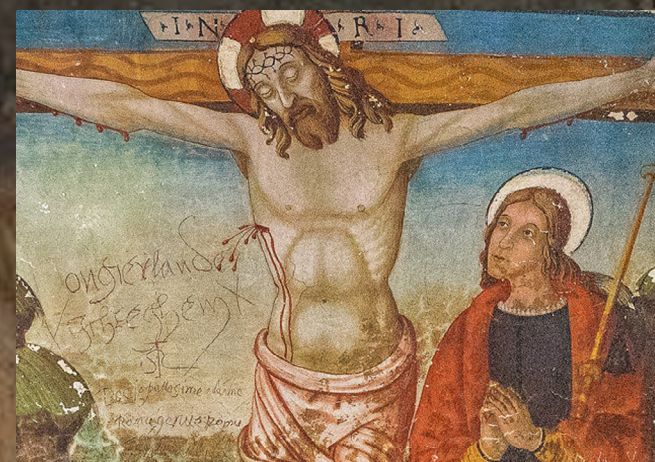


Figure 3: Piedicammoro (Perugia), Chapel of the Blessed Virgin: graffiti on fifteenth century frescoes.

texts written on those pages. Similarly, graffiti written on the margins of frescoes are evidence of a dialogue between the viewers and the painted scenes or figures, and sometimes, also with the formal inscriptions accompanying the figurative representations. Graffiti can also be written on the margins of painted

panels so as not to deface the figures depicted, thereby showing respect and conformity to the values expressed by the artwork. Recognising the margins as writing spaces disrupts our certainties about the alleged misappropriation of the surfaces and the adventitious and almost parasitic nature of graffiti.

Figure 4: Spoleto (Perugia) — Church of St. Ponziano: detail of a graffito reading «Bene e peggio chocha chi mai ama bisocha che po(r)tano fede pocha al mio parere».



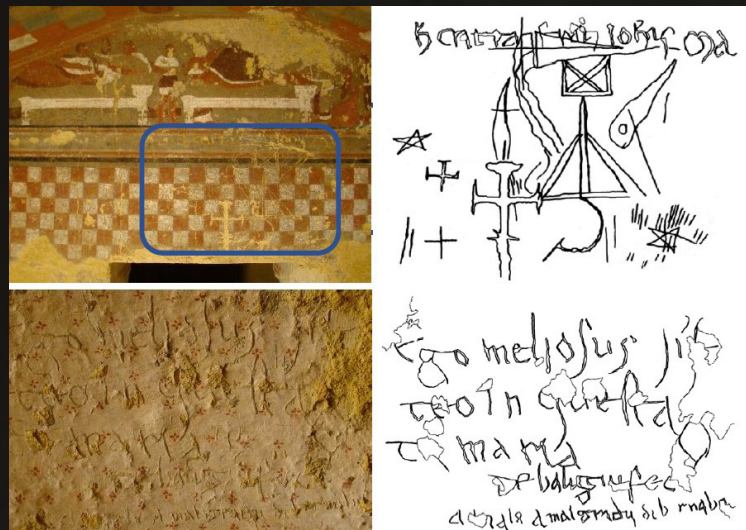


Figure 5: Tarquinia (Viterbo), Bartoccini Tomb: detail of a graffito reading: Ego Meliosus si f[ro]l[ro] in questa g[ro]l[ro]ta Maria | de baligiu. Fec[.] [la malg] a mal gradu di B[.]r[ro]no.

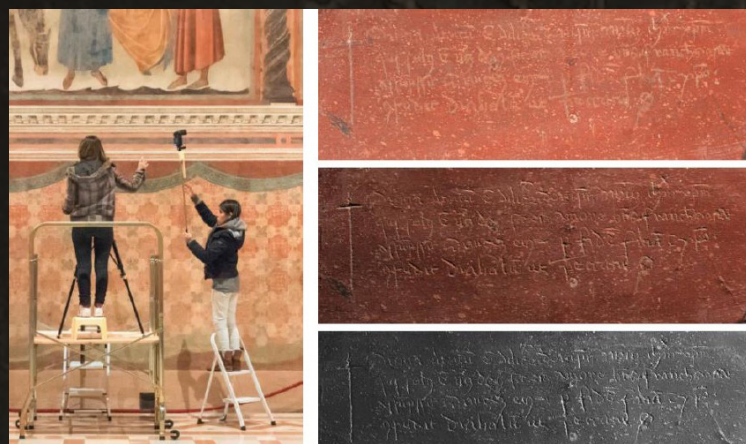


Figure 7: Assisi, Upper Basilica of S. Francis: on the right three images of the same graffito in natural light, in RTI and in PCA imaging; on the left the text reads: † Prima virtutum est diligere dominum nostrum Ihesum Christum | qui solus est verus Deus sic eius amore beatus Franciscus s[.]t[ur] | assumpsit virtutem eius et per fidem firmam in Christo | confudit diabolum ut peccatum. Ø.

A different meaning of marginality can also be found, one that has nothing to do with physicality but relates instead to writing and language. Graffiti is the primary source of knowledge of semi-literate writings, i.e. those at the border between full mastery and inexperience with written communication. Similarly, from a linguistic point of view, graffiti show all the gradations of the development of Latin towards Romance vernaculars and, within the latter, towards the use of textualities ranging between full awareness and improvisation.

From the perspective of historiography, the concept of marginality also reflects the modern prejudicial perception of graffiti as abusive expressions of social criticism. This is the same perception that justifies the criminalisation of

graffiti in many modern legal systems. Such a meaning, though anachronistic, has nevertheless contributed to the exclusion of graffiti from the rest of medieval and early modern written production, as expressed in codices, formal inscriptions, charters and other archival materials. If we, instead, look at graffiti as but one part of their cultural context, we realise that they are essential to the communication system of their time. Historians have hitherto only considered the 'top' part of that system, which belongs to the religious and secular institutions and to the *élites*. However, the *conditio sine qua non* to understand that system as a whole is to ensure that the 'bottom' part, to which graffiti pertain, is equally integrated into historical theory and practice. Therefore, if we want to better understand graffiti's

nature, function, and role, it is crucial to change our perspective and examine them in their original context and in relation to all kinds of written media. We should not apply to graffiti the values and views that belong to contemporary cultures. For this reason, the Graff-IT project intends to bring into the focus of scholarly research a history of signs which, despite its seemingly humble nature, alongside great collections of medieval *Monumenta*, claims its due place in the yet far too strict classification of historical sources as either documentary, narrative or normative.

### A systematic approach

From a survey of the bibliographical databases *Regesta Imperii* and *International Medieval Bibliography*, a

conspicuous number of publications devoted to graffiti emerges, with 395 and 211 hits, respectively. Taking a closer look at the content of such publications, we cannot fail to note their random and uncoordinated nature. Furthermore, most of these studies are merely descriptive and fail to address the profound motivations behind the making of graffiti and the implications of this writing practice. Yet, the sheer number of publications and the flourishing of (other) graffiti projects show a great deal of attention being paid to this phenomenon in contemporary culture. In this scenario, the Graff-IT project seeks to offer a response to a widespread need for a more systematic approach to the study of graffiti by defining scientific standards in the collecting, analysing, and interpreting processes. This is a necessary step to shed more light on the nature and role of graffiti in medieval culture and incorporate them into the realm of historiographical thought and practice.

### Project stages

The work of the project is organised in two main steps. During the first three years (2022–2024), a survey of the evidence of graffiti and the implementation of a digital archive will be completed. In addition, the organisation of four international workshops and the dissemination of scientific outcomes through open access publications have also been planned within this period. The systematic data collection, text editing and study of graffiti in their context will be accompanied by field missions and surveys, both bibliographical and archival. So far, 175 sites preserving graffiti have been detected, but more are expected to be found. The second step of the project (2025–2026) will be devoted to processing the data previously collected and to the organisation of another international workshop, two conferences, and an exhibition on graffiti.

### Project impact

The Graff-IT project seeks to have a profound and durable scientific impact on several domains of the humanities

for several reasons. The edition of medieval and Renaissance Italian graffiti in an open-access digital archive will provide the scientific community with a *corpus* of texts covering a chronological span of nine centuries. This will allow comparative investigations to be carried out over the *longue durée* and focus on studying more specific themes and contexts. Furthermore, considering the remarkable informative potential of graffiti, scholars trained in the criticism of the traditionally taught sources will pay more attention to these usually neglected sources. For example, experts in the history of religious practices will certainly recognise the importance of graffiti to explore a net of underground sanctuaries. Art historians will understand more easily the importance of a signature left by the nine-year-old Michelangelo on one of the major antique monuments of Rome. The project will demonstrate how naturally graffiti lead to collaboration among different disciplinary fields while enhancing the potentialities of each individual one. The interdisciplinary development and sharing of a common research method will hopefully lead to the creation of an international network of scholars specialised in the study of historical graffiti.

Finally, the Graff-IT project is expected to have an important impact outside the academic world through the making of an open digital archive, the dissemination of open access publications and the planning of the exhibition, which are meant to give public visibility to the material documentation which this project focuses on. A possible outcome is that the cultural heritage departments may be encouraged to develop a greater sensitivity towards the delicate issue of the conservation of graffiti. A new awareness of the historical importance of graffiti will undoubtedly arise from all this, spreading knowledge within the academic world and outside to a wider audience of cultural heritage users and stakeholders, which this project also wants to address.



### PROJECT TITLE

Writing on the Margins: Graffiti in Italy (7<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries)

### PROJECT SUMMARY

The ERC AdvGrant Graff-IT project aims to develop a new interdisciplinary approach to the study of medieval and Renaissance graffiti (seventh–sixteenth century) as a historical source. The project will have an innovative and groundbreaking effect on the study of graffiti in their multifaceted complexity: writing, image, language, and material aspects. Innovative tools and methods will be used to build out the first digital archive of Italian graffiti.

### PROJECT PARTNERS

The project will be supported by the Foreigners' University of Perugia in the study of graffiti in vernacular and dialect language with a focus on the graffiti in the Upper Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, and by the University of Padua, which will support the PI in the study of the graffiti in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.

### PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

Born in 1964, Prof. Tedeschi was educated at the University of Rome "La Sapienza", then obtained a doctorate at the University of Macerata. As a paleographer, he has gained experience in Italy and abroad in the field of book and documentary writings and developed a particular interest in "public" writings, inscriptions and graffiti.

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