



The Sacred and Typography

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Scratching beneath the surface:

Devotion and graffiti in Canterbury Cathedral

Jack Coulson, University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury, UK, jcoulson4@uca.ac.uk
Anne Sørensen, University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury, UK, asorensen@uca.ac.uk
Dr Sara Andersdotter, University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury, UK,
sara.andersdotter@uca.ac.uk

Abstract: Located from within art and design practice and inquiry, this paper will discuss research on typographical carvings into churches and ancient buildings, the main example being those found in Canterbury Cathedral, situated in central Canterbury, England. We will look at the term ‘medieval graffiti’ and discuss how attitudes towards acts of inscription have changed over time.

Key words: *Canterbury Cathedral, inscription, medieval graffiti, pilgrimage, prayer, pre-reformation, reductive carvings, ritual, scratching, site-specific, touch, typography, United Kingdom, worship.*

1. Introduction

“To write one’s name somewhere in a sacred place leaves a presence, one that outlasts the brevity of a life, indeed ‘forever’” (Dupront, 1987: p. 403)

Scratched by hand into the stone walls of one of Britain’s oldest, holy and symbolic structures of Christianity, Canterbury Cathedral, are letters. Words, names, messages, symbols and prayers carved into a place of divine power. Here, type marks a presence; a Barthesan *ça-a-été* [this-has-been] of devotions and identities of the past that clashes into those of contemporary life. I was here.

The current Cathedral building sits on a potentially nearly 2000-year-old site. Nearby is St Augustine’s Abbey, where the kings, queens and archbishops of the ancient kingdom of Kent lie. A 2000-year-old pagan temple sits just below the surface of the modern city’s high-street (Lyle, 2002). These three sites are the main reason Canterbury has been the center of worship in Britain since Roman times. Additionally, in 1170 the Archbishop

Thomas Becket was murdered on the floor of Canterbury Cathedral, which sent shockwaves throughout Christendom, and it soon became the most important Christian site in medieval Europe (Butler, 1996).

The historical, vernacular inscriptions found at Canterbury Cathedral had both “meaning and function” (Champion, 2015: p. 5) within a wider practice of ritual and worship, where the physicality of the scratched surface turned internal prayer into material culture and became indicators of the growth of literacy (Plesch, 2002: p. 169). In fact, the medieval landscape of Europe was littered in graffiti, from political agendas to personal slights. However, when viewing such messages, one must take into consideration the contexts surrounding their inscriptions, as the idea of graffiti being an anti-social, criminal or rebellious act is a very modern one. Born out of the 19th Century, this approach to graffiti as vandalism has come to inform legislation in the United Kingdom since. In the 1970s, such attitudes were reflected in the so-called ‘broken windows theory’, which further reinforces the idea that crime is encouraged by the environment around those who commit it (Dickinson, 2008). A key researcher and writer in the field, Matthew Champion, notes that problematically, these negative associations have erroneously led to the viewing of historical inscriptions through the lens of contemporary attitudes (2017). However, in the last 20 years, new research into historical graffiti has emerged and provided us with a far greater understanding of what it meant to carve into a historic or sacred monument. It is with such findings in mind, and from within contemporary art, design and visual communication practice and pedagogy, that we approach the medieval graffiti at Canterbury Cathedral.

2. Rituals of devotion, desire and touch: the written word materialised

If one considers the etymology of the term graffiti, one can see that it suggests a scratching or a scribble (Etymology.com, n.d.). Signs of such forms of graffiti can be found in a wide range of cultural sites, and the carvings found in England’s ecclesiastical monuments are often site-specific, usually linked to faith. One of the earliest known cases of such inscriptions in England dates to the 12th Century, when the religious anchorite Christina of Markyate scratched a “private vow of devotion and chastity” into the doorway of the abbey of St Albans with her fingernail (Geddes, 2005: p. 9). This act of physically, and potentially painfully, scratching a private vow into the doorway, is also to be understood as a social act with a public message of devotion. Here, the sacrality of the place and the materiality of the inscription were of utmost importance, and implied

through the very presence of the scratches, is *touch*.

Tactility is central to multiple faiths, where physical touch becomes a conduit for spiritual communication. Think only of how bodily contact with relics and other items of significance, prayer beads, statues, sacred places and sites of apparition symbolise a personal, private and sensorial connection between the individual and divinity. The highly sensorial experience of Canterbury Cathedral can be understood as one of ritual, power and convergence. It was, and still is, a destination of pilgrimage - the end point of physical and spiritual journeys - forming what James Ingram calls a “ritualised landscape” (2021: p. 31), with its material presence of centuries of hopes, fears and prayers. The Cathedral is one of the most celebrated structures in England, and has long been a destination for Christian pilgrims. As such, the medieval graffiti scribbled on its interior walls may initially seem unfathomably destructive and sacrilegious, and from a current perspective we may sense tensions between desires to preserve and desires to express oneself. What would bring a devotee to not only touch, but to permanently mark the walls of such a sacred place?

Through its materiality, the carved text conjures up ideas of the moment of its inscription; it seduces us, its viewers, into imagining the person who deliberately embedded into the wall of a sacred building a message, with intent. It leads us to wonder about the circumstances of such an act; who this individual was, what led to the choice of words, and what motivated them to carve this specific text into this particular building. Simultaneously, one may also imagine what it would feel like to hold a sharp instrument in one’s hand and inscribe this message. So, what is it about the act of graffiti that our current culture is so abhorred by? The British geographer and poet Tim Cresswell writes in his work *In/Out of Place* that behaviour is closely connected to *place*, noting that we may identify concerns around graffiti relating to three changes to a place: “something is out of place”, “some act is out of place” and “some act is incompatible with the *proper* meaning of place” (Cresswell, 1992: p. 60). Cresswell notes that the cultural fears around such changes are tied to worries that the graffiti may change the meaning of said place, and as such, the place itself would not be the same. Furthermore, the perception would be that through this shift, the meaning of the place would now be determined by the culture surrounding the transgressive acts of graffiti, and eventually it would become “theirs” (ibid).

However, as previously noted, this reflects a very modern mindset, our ongoing debates around whether graffiti is vandalism or art, and a view of such places as places of not just religious, but also of historical, architectural and cultural importance. One may also want to reflect on differences in approaches to what we consider private and public space, and on socio-cultural differences in responses to “private acts” taking place in public spaces (Milnor, 2014: p: 21). Looking at the vernacular typographical inscriptions at Canterbury Cathedral and considering its specific contexts may therefore enable a different perspective of a previous society, and the emergence of a new way of viewing type.

Long before the term ‘graffiti’ was coined in the 19th Century, there was a distinction in various places between official and unofficial writing, and different scholars disagree with one another around the social and cultural acceptability of unauthorised writing in ancient and medieval times (van Eck, 2018). Though it is tempting to search for a specific shift, a point in time when such scratchings became seen as profane, it is near impossible.

The form of graffiti we are focusing on in Canterbury Cathedral, however, cannot be taken out of its ritual and memorial context; the acts that gave rise to its presence. Art historian Veronique Plesch notes that in this context, the graffiti was more closely tied to the *process* than the result, and as such, represents a ritualistic act (2005), and we may view the result as more than text; a material object. The graffiti found at Canterbury Cathedral was created by pilgrims and devotees, and the texts they inscribed were understood as “additive” rather than destructive as per the fears outlined by Cresswell. These were not careless, unplanned scribbles, but part of purposeful rituals seen as key to making the place itself sacred, creating connections to the divine, and ensuring the continuation of the Cathedral’s value.

These devotional acts were also highly social acts, and their presence imply both individuality and cohesion to a group. The 19th Century novelist and critic Samuel Butler called the result of such acts “soul-fossils” (Butler, 1882, quoted in: van Eck, 2018: p. 52), as pilgrims left a permanent mark of presence and devotion; a private-yet-public, tactile and permanent written whisper into the ear of God. Such inscriptions are part of a Christian ritualistic practice of expressions of devotion (Dhoop et al, 2016) or leaving apotropaic marks, that up until the 19th Century was for the most part an accepted practice - authorised or not - where the carved writing evidences a certain human presence whose voice “holds out a promise of authenticity” (Breed, 2006: p. 6). This evidence reflects what the French theorist, philosopher and critic Roland Barthes called

the ca-a-ete - the this-has-been - of the photographic image (Barthes, 1980/1993); much like the photograph guarantees a pastness, so does the presence of the inscription. What it does not guarantee are the circumstances and motivations around its creation. In his later work *The Responsibility of Forms*, Barthes is concerned with all things visible and audible, and by considering the notion of voice here, one may consider it a dual utterance; at once a written voice *and* an imagined spoken voice. The motivation, according to Barthes, would be driven not by “reckoning or reason... but a desire” (Barthes, 1991: p. 155); an expressive desire that ultimately makes the inscribed walls vocalise in the present voices and thoughts of the past. That is, there in an interplay here of the past, the present and the future; the text’s ambition reaches “simultaneously both forward and backward in time, creating a permanence that [stands] in stark contrast to the ephemeral nature of speech (Breed, 2006: p. 72).

We may also want to consider the devotional literacy of the individuals carving prayers into the walls of Canterbury Cathedral and other sites of spiritual and religious importance. Their presence is also a sign of a widening familiarity with scriptures, language and typography; a familiarity that started to seep across boundaries of social class and status, enabled by religious institutions. The formation of letters at times mirror those of sacred manuscripts, and as such perform particular texts’ populism, signifying an awareness of the conventions of religious writings (Milnor, 2014: p. 9). This is an awareness borne out of relationships between oral and written cultures, where speaking and writing were understood as fundamentally social acts.

Given the religious nature of these carved texts, we may want to reflect on the fact that the writings form physical manifestations of internal thought and speech. Their physicality goes beyond the merely visual. These texts are not written *onto* the surface of a wall, but scratched deep into - *beneath* - the surface, and as such are not only visible, but also tactile and haptic; by merely looking at the inscribed letters, we can imagine, and almost feel, the grooves under our fingertips. Here, we - the reader, the viewer, the visitor, the contemplator - are made to “confront the materiality of the written word” (Milnor, 2014: p. 26).

3. Conclusion

In July 2023, it was widely reported in the news that a tourist from England had been accused of defacing the Colosseum in Rome. He had scratched his and his girlfriend’s

names into the wall of the well-known amphitheatre. As with the carvings in the Cathedral, there still seems to be this desire to leave a mark in places of significance.

While many sources on medieval graffiti view the subject through an architectural or art historian lens, our research activities have been from a Visual Communication perspective. We have done so with an interest in the actual typographical elements and forms of the carvings, closely related to local contexts and focused on quotes from scriptures and curses as well as protective symbols found at Canterbury Cathedral.

We do not know who was able to read and write when the carvings were made or where the people who made them had seen other typographical forms. We have asked ourselves if and where they were copying the letterforms from? What we do know is that the visual stories of the carvings show energy and emotion and hold up a mirror to the society, times, and attitudes in which they were written - just like the history of typography, how this has changed over time, and is continually changing.

Looking at the history of typography is an ideal way to explore the carvings in context and to consider how the people who made them might have developed the marks. From early cave paintings to hieroglyphs and runes, through to illustrated manuscripts and printed material, we can study the evolution of symbols and typographical forms.

We now have variable typography and technological possibilities that would have been unimaginable when these carvings were made. Many stone masons still use traditional skills to carve letters, but many also use new technology, such as lasers, to cut the letterforms. This gives more precision but removes the direct mark of the hand and tool, which can never be perfect, even when produced by someone highly skilled.

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