



## **Leaving Their Mark: Traces of the Early Christian Movement in Smyrna Through Graffiti**

Melissa Yorio, University of Notre Dame

### ***Abstract***

*This paper analyzes early Christian graffiti found in the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna with special attention given to their relationship to the space and how readers would have interacted with them. Using these specific examples, this paper argues that Christians identified with their faith, marked their movements, and carved out their own space in a public, shared environment.*

### ***Key Words***

Graffiti, Smyrna, Early Christianity, Michel de Certeau

### ***Introduction***

Graffiti has been a cultural phenomenon in both the modern and the ancient worlds. Despite being formally discouraged today, the epigraphic habit has remained strong. The urge to express oneself in the form of words and figures remains a staple of daily life. In the modern context, graffiti is seen most commonly in public settings with high traffic areas. For many of us, when we think of modern graffiti, we think of city subways and highway overpasses. To the modern person, graffiti is often associated with population density and movement. Such considerations can be applied to the study of ancient graffiti as well. As Rebecca Benefiel (2010) reminds us, graffiti “should be examined within its spatial and social context...Graffiti are valuable for their textual content but also for the window they provide onto many other, less immediately visible aspects of ancient society” (p. 114).

The purpose of this paper is to examine Christian graffiti found in the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna and to suggest possible connections between graffiti, the appropriation of space, and movement. The Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna holds within its walls a treasure trove of ancient graffiti. This study focuses on only a few graffiti from a generous sample: nestled between drawings of ships, greetings to friends, and insults to neighbors, are a number of curious Christian graffiti in the Basilica in the Agora that call for further examination. Among these fascinating graffiti, there are at least three overtly Christian graffiti (AGP-SMYT00201; AGP-SMYTP1002; AGP-SMYTP1003), which are supplemented by a few that,

although damaged, can be interpreted as Christian. As we shall see, early Christians used this graffiti as a means of identity formation within their city, for political engagement or displaying devotion. We begin, however, with a brief discussion of the context of the Basilica in Smyrna, Christian and other devotional graffiti, and relevant information about early Christian life in the city.

Smyrna was a port city on the Aegean coast of Anatolia, which is now present-day Izmir, Turkey. The best-preserved section of the city is the agora, and within the agora is the Basilica. The Basilica was initially a Hellenistic stoa, but was renovated during the first century into the form of a Roman basilica. The Basilica in the Agora in Smyrna holds some of the best-preserved graffiti in the region. The graffiti includes approximately 155 figural inscriptions and 170 textual inscriptions. These graffiti would have been scratched into the walls with sharp implements such as styluses, or painted in red or black ink. In addition to the authentic Christian graffiti found at this site, there are other graffiti that emphasizes Smyrna as a healing shrine for eyes, often attributed to the healing power of a local deity (Bagnall, 2011, p. 22). Construction of the Basilica began in the second century BCE when it was a Hellenistic stoa; this, however, was destroyed in 178 CE and quickly rebuilt in the 180s (Bagnall, 2011, pp. 7–8). Most of the graffiti discussed in this paper were created in the late second and third centuries unless otherwise noted.

### ***The Christian Graffiti of the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna***

Scholars including Roger Bagnall, Roberta Casagrande-Kim, and Burak Yoloçan agree that there are graffiti in Smyrna that are “unmistakably Christian in character,” but these are “impressions that cannot be pushed too far” (Bagnall, 2018, pp. 214–216). As Bagnall explains “possible evidence for Christianity among the graffiti from the agora is more suggestive than firm” (Bagnall, 2015, p. 47). Pushing against this paradigm, this paper proposes that although there may be few Christian graffiti in number, the significance of the Christian authorship of graffiti is of greater importance than previously suggested.

There are a variety of reasons why Christian graffiti may be less common in Ancient Smyrna. The most prevailing theory is that the Christian population was simply too small to contribute more significantly to the epigraphic landscape. This theory is likely correct as the evidence we have today supports it without the need for additional speculation. Other theories require some speculation. A second, reasonable, hypothesis is that there were more Christian graffiti written

in the Basilica, but that over the course of time, they have not been preserved. Considering the political context of Smyrna, we can add another possible interpretation: Smyrnaean Christians may have felt social pressure to minimize their visibility in the city, and thus an absence in the epigraphic record might reflect an effort among Christians to camouflage themselves within their community. In this light, the small number of Christian graffiti takes on a deeper significance as a part of a deliberate attempt to navigate the broader cultural and religious context.

One of the most overtly Christian graffiti in the Basilica in Smyrna is one that reads “ὁ δεδωκ[ὸς] τὸ πνεῦμ[α]” (AGP-SMYT00201), which can be translated as “the one who gave the spirit” (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 213). Πνεῦμα, although commonly translated as “spirit,” can also carry a different connotation, namely that of “a vital physiological and cosmological substance that was active in varying amounts in all areas of the cosmos” (Robertson, 2014, p. 368). The meaning of πνεῦμα may have been variable in early Christianity and one should approach the ὁ δεδωκ[ὸς] τὸ πνεῦμ[α] graffiti with a nuanced understanding of this term. This graffiti is a reference to Jesus Christ and, likely, the Holy Spirit as well. It is possible that this graffiti is a reference to John 3:34: “He [Jesus] whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure” (New Standard Revised Version Bible). The second half of this verse reads “δίδωσιν τὸ πνεῦμα” in the original Greek (Novum Testamentum Graece). The author of the graffiti changed the verb to a verbal noun, but retained the meaning of John 3:34. If this graffiti is indeed making reference to John 3:34, this epithet for Jesus could demonstrate how the Christians in Smyrna understood Christ’s figure prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325. In addition, this reference suggests that the Gospel of John was popular within the Christian community in Smyrna as the graffiti suggests that individuals would have known the material from John’s Gospel well enough to play with the concept laid out in John 3:34.

Moreover, the placement of the graffiti is as fascinating as its content. It is found about 5 feet above a bench, indicating that it was likely written by an adult standing on the bench. This adult would have had to step upon the balcony and write a relatively long graffiti using a stylus at chest height, which would be considerably more difficult and time consuming than sketching a letter or two while standing on the basilica’s floor. The location of the graffiti thus suggests that the author was intentional in their choice of location. Perhaps this location could serve as a place that would allow the message of the graffiti to be best advertised to passersby. In addition to its placement, this graffiti is large. It has an overall width of thirty centimeters and an overall height of

eighteen centimeters, with individual letter heights ranging between four and six centimeters. The text was written in a manner that would have been extremely legible even a few meters away. To be able to write a relatively long statement at such height with large letters may have drawn attention to its author and its message, for better or worse.

In addition to its height upon the wall, this graffito is located in Bay 20, in close proximity to a graffito of a thymiaterion or incense burner (AGP-SMYD00193). Benefiel (2010) has suggested that graffiti can often be in dialogue with one another. Does the proximity between the ὀ δεδωκ[ῶς] τὸ πνεῦμ[α] graffito and the thymiaterion graffito encourage the idea that they could be in dialogue? There are good reasons for thinking that it does. The burning of incense in a thymiaterion was a popular component of ancient Mediterranean religions and was a particularly popular practice in Jewish devotion. Karen Stern writes that “during excavations of synagogues in the Levant, Anatolia, Italy, and North Africa, archaeologists recovered countless fragments of lamps, goblets, and censers, composed of stone, ceramic, glass, copper-alloy, and bronze, whose presence suggests their original uses for illuminating and scenting surrounding spaces” (Stern, 2023, p. 191). Given the established Jewish communities at Aphrodisias and Smyrna, the thymiaterion could have referred to pagan or Jewish practices, or perhaps it was painted to symbolize a general religious atmosphere. Similar to the ὀ δεδωκ[ῶς] τὸ πνεῦμ[α] graffito, there is a graffito that reads “ΠΙΝ” on Pier 63 (AGP-SMYTP0631), which likely read πνευμα before it became abraded. This graffito could have been made with a message similar to the previous πνευμα graffito, but given the fragmentary nature of the evidence, we can only speculate. Although the sample of Christian graffiti in Smyrna is small, in relative terms the portion of graffiti addressing πνευμα is substantial and, perhaps, this demonstrates the importance of πνευμα in the Smyrnaean understanding of Christianity and the Trinitarianism.

Another overtly Christian graffito reads “θελητή ἡ κυρία” (AGP-SMYTP1002), which has been translated as “the desired lady” (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 421). On the surface, this language of desire makes this graffito seem more erotic than religious. However, by the period of the Basilica’s rebuild in the 180s, the Greek word θελητός is regularly used by Christians in the senses of “blessed.” It is a word that occurs in the Septuagint and subsequent texts, and it is rarely used outside the Christian context. This meaning can be seen in Malachi 3:12 (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη διότι ἔσεσθε ὑμεῖς γῆ θελητή), in which the nations are said to be “blessed” (Septuagint). With this in mind, this graffito might be translated as “the blessed lady.” The lady in question is unknown, but

Roger Bagnall (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 80) has postulated that this lady may be the Virgin Mary owing to Mary's early prominence in Christian theology and practice. This Christian reading is strengthened by the location of the graffito: it shares a pier with a Christian graffito (AGP-SMYTP1003). I suggest that graffiti in this area is more likely to be Christian than anywhere else in this space since this area has more Christian influence. Additionally, this graffito has an average letter height of two centimeters and is incised. Unlike the previous textual graffito that may reference John, this graph is notably smaller. While it was still intentionally made, the small size suggests this graffito was not necessarily preplanned and the message was not meant to be widely read.

Close to the "blessed lady" graffito, there is another graffito that acts as a fascinating instance of a public graffito coded with private meaning. In the bay next to the previous graffito, a graffito reads "Ἰσόψηφα / κύριος ω / πίστις ω" (AGP-SMYTP1003). The first word "Ἰσόψηφα," meaning "isopsephy," signals to the reader that this graffito is isopsephic, or a numeral equation with equivalencies.

Concisely explained:

Greek letters represented both specific phonetic characters and numbers, distinguished by a stroke above a letter functioning as a number. The letters' duality gave birth to the practice of isopsephy, whereby combinations of letters could be analyzed not only phonetically but also according to their numeric values, and could thus be deciphered as hidden numbers with symbolic illusions. (Garipzanov, 2018, pp. 30–31)

While this practice may seem unusual to the modern reader, it was not unusual in the ancient world. Early Christians viewed names and numbers as "intrinsically related" (Garipzanov, 2018, p. 31). In addition, Bagnall (2011) explains that "isosephism was extremely popular with Christians, and the habit of writing a name in this fashion survives into late antiquity" (p. 15). In late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin letters could sometimes have symbolic meanings, which lead to extralinguistic interpretations of them later (Bagnall et al., 2015, pp. 83–88). The author is, in more than one way, inviting the readers, especially his or her fellow Christians, to engage in a word game. The word "isopsephy" encourages the reader to solve the word equation.

The next word of the equation is "κύριος," which is translated as "lord," and which, when taken for its individual letters, is equivalent to eight hundred, or omega as the writer designates. The next line "πίστις,"

which is translated as “faith,” is also equivalent to eight hundred or omega when each letter is assigned a numerical value. In its entirety, this graffito says, “Equal in value: lord, 800. Faith, 800” (Bagnall et al., 2015, pp. 532–533). The emphasis placed on the equality of the lord and faith denotes an “inescapably Christian” context. Perhaps the author was trying to express to the readers the significance of the faith in Christ being as important as Christ himself. This is, of course, conjecture, but the word play found in this graffito surely encourages speculation into the motives and intended meaning.

This isopsephic graffito was incised with letter heights of approximately one centimeter, which suggests the possibility of a spontaneous decision on the part of the writer. Their complex message, however, seems to suggest some forethought regarding the content of the graffito.

Even if no other graffiti could be interpreted as Christian, Smyrna had at least a small number of Christian graffiti, indicating a community attempting to communicate their message both with relative subtlety and a quiet confidence.

### ***Smyrnaean Graffiti with Potential Christian Interpretations***

The three inscriptions discussed are clearly of a Christian nature. Beyond this, there are others that possess elements indicative of a Christian context. Although conjectural, a reassessment of some of the graffiti in Smyrna is called for in light of the recurrence of certain themes throughout the basilica. When considered in the larger context of the basilica, certain motifs, like fish graffiti, could be interpreted as Christian, and these interpretations would thereby increase the amount of Christian graffiti in the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna, and, thus, the imply a greater presence of Christians in Smyrna in the late second and third centuries. This, however, takes us into the realm of speculation: as mentioned, “possible evidence for Christianity among the graffiti from the agora is more suggestive than firm” (Bagnall, 2015, p. 47).

A graffito that has a high probability of being Christian is one that reads “καρπο” (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 274; AGP-SMYT00284). This graffito was painted toward the middle of the pier with letters that are four to five centimeters high. The painted nature of the graffito indicates preparation on the part of author. The placement of the painted graffito in a central location both in the basilica and on the wall suggests an interest in promoting the message. It is also in the same bay as a word game, a gladiator’s name, a ship, gladiatorial combat scenes, and spectators in the arena. This graffito exists on a lower level of plaster,

which indicates that it may have been written no later than 180 (Bagnall, 2015, p. 81). If the graffito read καρπο[ς], it would mean “fruit,” a word that could simply refer to fruit, but καρπος was often used in the phrase “fruit of the spirit,” a reference to Galatians 5:22–23.

There may, however, be a more compelling and localized interpretation of this graffito. The area surrounding it is damaged, with the plaster above this line broken off, and Roger Bagnall, the excavator of the site, has suggested a reading of [Πολύ]καρπο[ς]. This interpretation of the graffito remains more speculative, but would lead to fascinating conclusions, were we able to confirm it. As Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna during the period in which graffiti would have been etched on the walls, it follows that there must have been a group of Christians who followed his teachings not only in private but also publicly enough to write graffiti that presented themselves as part of his religious movement. Or perhaps this could be an inscription left by a Christian or non-Christian spectator of Polycarp’s martyrdom in 166 CE (Hasluck, 1913, p. 80). Throughout the Basilica complex and particularly in this bay, there are numerous figural and literary graffiti depicting various types of gladiators, hunting scenes, and names of famous gladiators. It is plausible that this graffito reads “Polycarp” for the same reason – making him just another spectacle in the arena. Perhaps someone was recalling the martyr much as one might write down the name of a favored gladiator. Indeed, Polycarp’s martyrdom did take place in the same arena in Smyrna in which gladiators fought for entertainment. The painted Polycarp inscription could also have served as a reminder to Christians of the consequences of practicing Christianity in Smyrna, although this seems unlikely. If read as Polycarp, it could have been written by a Christian hand in remembrance of an influential bishop or perhaps even a friend; more generally, this graffito would suggest that there was a populace at least aware of the Christian movement and the imperial pushback against it. If read as being a reference to the “fruit of the spirit,” it demonstrates the writer’s knowledge of Pauline literature. This graffito, then, offers up interesting possibilities, but unfortunately, any interpretations must remain speculative.

In addition to the written graffiti, there are a few examples of figural graffiti that could be interpreted as Christian. There are three inscriptions found in the Basilica that depict fish (AGP-SMYDP0761, AGP-SMYDP012, AGP-SMYDP0151). Smyrna is a port city, so the depiction of fish among their fauna is not unusual. However, these fish graffiti could contain early Christian symbolism. The symbol of the fish could be representative of Christ, of the newly baptized, and of the Eucharist. All three of these inscriptions are painted with black ink, but

seem to be made by different hands. The graffiti of these fish suggest that they were premediated. Two of the fish are red mullets and one is too plain to identify. Each or all of these fish could have distinct Christian meaning without having a relation to the others. A curious connection between these three fish graffiti is that they all face toward the northern corridor of the Basilica. This could be coincidental, but it seems more likely to have been deliberate. Two possible meanings of the fish's direction present themselves. The first is that the local river or port was located in the northerly direction that the fish face. A second possibility is that these fish graffiti indicate a location of a Christian meeting place, whether clandestine or public. While it is possible that they could indicate a public meeting, this seems unlikely because street announcements in graffiti were quite common. What seems more probably is that fish would be indicating a private meeting or at least a meeting that they were not publicly advertising. Given the proximity of Aphrodisias, Angelos Chaniotis has suggested that the fish indeed be understood as an early Christian symbol that supplements the Christian reading in Smyrna (Chaniotis, 2016, p. 97).

There is also a possibility that two graffiti recording the name Zoe have an early Christian reference. This name is incredibly common in the Greek-speaking world. However, in the graffiti recorded from Smyrna, the orthography differs. Instead of the traditional spelling of Ζωή, the spelling throughout Smyrna is Ζοή (AGP-SMYTP0631, AGP-SMYT00421). This name has a possible Christian context as the name Zoe is used in the Septuagint for Eve. Supplementing this reading is a graffito that reads “Εύη” or “Eve” (AGP-SMYTP0711). It would have been rare during the late second and early third century to have written the name Eve, but it has been recorded in Oxyrhynchus Papyri from around the same period (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 460). Bagnall argues for a Christian interpretation on account of the evidence presented above, and because of Chaniotis' interpretation of this spelling in Aphrodisias as a representation of “a Christian declaration of faith and hope in eternal life.” When applied to Smyrna graffiti it “seems generally likely that these are to be seen as Christian” (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 274; Chaniotis, 2014, pp. 20–21). Although it remains speculative whether these graffiti explicitly reference Eve, the similarity between the Ζοή graffiti in Smyrna and the Ζωή mentioned in the Septuagint is notable and warrants further inquiry.

The graffiti introduced and analyzed in this section have elements suggesting that a Christian interpretation is possible, if not likely. The κάρπο graffiti, the fish graffiti, and the Ζοή graffiti would suggest a



greater Christian presence in Smyrna if their meanings could be confirmed.

### ***Non-Christian Devotional Graffiti in the Basilica of the Agora***

While the focus of this study has been on Christian graffiti, the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna had several different types of religious graffiti etched upon its wall. In addition to the graffiti that are influenced by Christianity, other practices represented are non-Christian in origin.

A curious subset of graffiti suggest that the Basilica of the Agora was a well-known healing shrine for eyes. Throughout the Basilica complex, there are seven graffiti that record the healing of people's eyes in Smyrna. Although such graffiti constitutes only about two percent of the sample size from the Basilica, given how specific this category is, it still makes up a statistically significant portion of the data. While other scholars, especially the excavators, took note of the unusual number of eye healings, there still remains a great deal of mystery as to the source of these healings at the basilica. A number of the graffiti seem to reference the small spring directly outside the Basilica. Bagnall (2015) noted that the small spring at the west end of the basilica is still popular among residents of Izmir today, but the connection between the stream, the healings, and the modern appreciation of the spring remains unclear at this point (p. 75). Two graffiti of eye healings stress the suddenness of the recipients' healings after visiting and praying at the basilica (Bagnall et al., 2015, pp. 210–212 and 267–269). Specifically, one of these graffiti reads "Χαρίας ὁ καὶ Λου-/ κοῦ εὐξάμενος / περὶ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν / τοὺς λύχνους ἀπεδωκε / ἔτους σι," which can be translated as "Charias also called Loukos, having prayed concerning his eyes, dedicated the lamps. Year 210" (Bagnall, 2015, p. 75; AGP-SMYT00161). This graffito lists the prayer for the eyes, healing, and dedication of lamps in thanksgiving, which follows the ancient custom for vows. It is large, with an area seventy-five meters wide and thirty-seven meters tall (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 267). This size suggests the writer was seeking to advertise their healing and related dedication. This graffito is just one example of some of the graffiti that could give the Basilica a spiritual or religious atmosphere. Significantly, most of the graffiti do not thank a specific god or gods. Smyrna was regarded as a place of healing in ancient medicine and perhaps, when graffiti refers to an unnamed deity healing their eyes, Christians might have felt comfortable participating, thinking of that deity as their own Christian God.

A notable exception to the general principle whereby divinities were left unnamed is found in some references to the name Baite. In two

graffiti, there is a reference to Baite, although it is difficult to discern who or what this is (AGP-SMYT00081; AGP-SMYT00271). One graffito reads “Being healed in my eyes by the gods, I give thanks to Baite.” This context suggests that Baite is some sort of object or person of devotion (AGP-SMYT00271). In Greek, the word Baite could mean a covered tent, a cloak, or room, but Bagnall suggests that the Baite could be a possessed fountain (Bagnall, 2011, p. 22). In any case, given the references to Baite, it seems most likely that she would be a local divinity. It is plausible that Baite is the divinity associated with the spring that assists in the healing of eyes. Regardless of what this figure means, at least two graffiti record Baite as a benevolent deity that was present in the minds of visitors to the Basilica.

Elsewhere in the Basilica, there is a pictorial depiction of a thymiaterion or incense burner (AGP-SMYD00193). These incense burners would be central to religious practices in the Mediterranean and were particularly popular in Greece and Asia Minor (Bagnall et al., 2015, p. 211). As discussed in the section on Christian graffiti, the thymiaterion was often used in Jewish practice, especially in synagogues (Stern, 2023). At present, there is no confirmed Jewish graffiti, but in Smyrna, there appears to be a lively culture of devotional graffiti in both Christian and non-Christian contexts.

### ***Assessing the Role of Christian Graffiti in Smyrna***

Beyond reconstructing possible early Christian communities, analyzing Christian graffiti in the context of a public pagan-coded space offers a glimpse into early Christian social behaviors. Early Christian graffiti act as objects of devotion, and as physical evidence of assimilation and political tools in Imperial Smyrna. The degree of confidence with which people create Christian graffiti varies, as we have seen, nevertheless, from this short analysis of this collection, we can detect the tangible early Christian presence in this building by 180 CE. From the collection discussed above, there is evidence of Christians identifying with their faith, marking their movements, and carving out their own space in a public, shared environment.

To develop my point, I turn to a framework introduced in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, particularly the chapter entitled “Walking in the City.” De Certeau uses New York City as an example to elucidate varying perspectives of city life. De Certeau begins the chapter with a study of the person watching the patterns of the city from the separated and elevated position of a skyscraper. This person is a “voyeur” able to “read” the masses. This paper will now attempt to

remove us from our birds-eye view of the graffiti in Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna and draw our attention to those walking at ground level. We can trace the potential routes of visitors to the basilica from above, but this paper is interested in what the impact of moving in the basilica would have felt like for a person in the late second century. As de Certeau explains, “the ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below’ ... the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 93). The social stimuli of sound, writing, and interpersonal relationships would change one’s perception of how they experienced and moved through a space such as the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna.

In a similar way, de Certeau reminds us that the physical environment “secretly structures” the conditions of social life (p. 96). In the context of Smyrna, the physical layout of the basilica may have shaped numerous elements of the social interaction within the building. For the Smyrnaeans, the layout of the basilica could separate people, provide places to gather, and have more popular thoroughfares and more secluded sections. These behaviors bred from the basilica’s dimensions affect not only how graffiti was made but also how it can be interpreted. The built environment affects how the graffiti writer could etch or paint upon the walls because the writer must adapt to the space, which can be seen in the ὁ δεδωκε[ῶς] τὸ πνεῦμα[α] graffiti written from a bench. The layout of the basilica should also affect scholars’ interpretations of a graffiti. For instance, the καρπο graffiti is located in Bay 28, which has other graffiti, particularly of a gladiator name, spectators in an arena, and a ship. To begin with, note that Bay 28 offered an enclosed space for walkers to rest in for a time. This space encouraged the making of graffiti, not only as a result of its layout but also for the previous graffiti that had become part of its physical environment. In this space where gladiatorial games are being recalled, it would be logical to infer that the damaged καρπο was initially a longer graffiti that referred to another famous person who fought in the arena. Conversely, if the καρπο graffiti was on a wall by itself, this reading would appear less likely. The physical dimensions of the space might help to determine the behaviors of those traveling through it and consequently influence the graffiti produced therein. This should be taken under consideration when interpreting graffiti.

Christian graffiti can serve as a physical example of what Michel de Certeau calls the “enunciative function of pedestrian street acts” (pp. 97–98.) If walking is the appropriation of the topographical space and a space for enunciation, then perhaps walking through the public basilica

and physically writing on the walls throughout it is a further appropriation of the city's structure and system. In the modern urban context, de Certeau writes,

We could mention the fleeting images, yellowish-green and metallic blue calligraphies that howl without raising their voices and emblazon themselves on the subterranean passages of the city, 'embroideries' composed of letters and numbers, perfect gestures of violence painted with a pistol, Shivas made of written characters, dancing graphics whose fleeting apparitions are accompanied by the rumble of subway trains: New York graffiti. (De Certeau, 1984, p. 102)

Applying de Certeau's theory on modern graffiti to ancient graffiti, it appears that the graffiti in the Basilica of the Agora could be used by early Christians in Smyrna to carve out (literally and figuratively) a space in an imperially coded building, making room for themselves among the rest of the Smyrnaeans. According to de Certeau, this act of etching into the walls is a means of laying claim to space and marking out their lived experience. It reaffirms their identity as both Christian and members of the greater Smyrnaean community. Even if there are relatively few marks of Christian origin, the authentic graffiti in the basilica demonstrate the bold actions of a group creating their own space in Smyrna. Just as other Smyrnaeans would write their thoughts and feelings on the walls, including certain religious beliefs, the Christian graffiti show how early Christians participated in the tradition of the space.

In addition, this public writing can be interpreted as a "devotional agent." Karen Stern and Alfred Gell argue that by writing graffiti, the writer prays within that moment and in perpetuity. Stern (2018) captures the concept of graffiti as a devotional agent best, saying that religious graffiti "continue to advocate for the memories, interests, dreams, and hopes of their writers, even today, hundreds to thousands of years after they originally carved them" (p. 75). In this way, graffiti can be seen as objects of devotion like sacrifice, altars, and relics. In this basilica, which operates as a healing shrine for eyes, perhaps this charged environment of pagan religiosity also inspires the Christian writers to express their faith as well. Christians may well have felt an equal entitlement to express their faith epigraphically.

Furthermore, while the writing of religious graffiti could carry a normative significance during this period, the practice of the Christian faith was under varying levels of scrutiny and persecution. If Smyrna's own bishop, Polycarp, could have been martyred during the same period in which the confirmed Christian graffiti were written, the reality of religious persecution would have been tangible to the writers of the

Christian graffiti. This, in turn, would suggest that their inscriptions were small acts of rebellion against their emperor and their state religion. It is difficult to know if the writers would have been persecuted during this period for writing such things upon the walls. Perhaps, the reason for the multiplicity of readings of the graffiti analyzed here is because of an intentional lack of specificity. Through the use of isopsephism and the fish symbolism, these graffiti could be secretly communicating Christian messages to the small community in Smyrna while avoiding the danger of persecution. Robertson (2014) concisely remarks that “In the ancient world, religion was not a separate sphere of personal or social activity. It was integrated into politics, agriculture, economics and trade, travel, and socializing, among other things” (p. 367). In this way, the Christians may have felt the need to fight for their faith and their space in Smyrna on the walls, much like their contemporaries may have done for political purposes or other more mainstream religious practices.

### ***Preliminary Conclusions***

The objective of this analysis is not to suggest that any graffito that remotely suggests a Christian reading should be taken as such. With an eye to widening one’s understanding of what makes an early Christian inscription, this essay has attempted to look at the variety of depictions, motivations, and contexts for early Christian graffiti in the Basilica in the Agora of Smyrna in relation to other religious graffiti in that space.

Beyond each individual graffito’s literal meaning and significance, the graffiti can be best understood when placed within their contexts. The ancient writers and readers of graffiti would make the graffiti as a byproduct of their relationship to the space. This encourages us to raise a number of questions: Can we examine how hospitable the environment is to the writer based on whether the letter are small or large? Does the size indicate the writer’s level of comfort? If using larger letters, is this an attempt to advertise their message? Would our perception of Christian graffiti be changed, if they were placed on the busiest thoroughfares within the basilica as opposed to a location that is more secluded (if such a place existed in a large central basilica such as this one)? In the future, a study of the geographical location of graffiti within the basilica would help to highlight exactly where Christian graffiti are concentrated and their relative relationship to non-Christian graffiti. What one can be certain of at this point is that Christian graffiti were interspersed with other devotional graffiti. This fact raises the questions: How are these types of graffiti related to one in another? Is there some

form of dialogue between these graffiti that makes sense only within their physical environment?

Regarding connections and dialogues, one must return to the concept of movement. While this paper has been primarily concerned with analyzing Christian graffiti, I have also conducted a preliminary exploration of the role of movement in Ancient Smyrna. This study has attempted to take us from our positions as “voyeurs” studying ancient daily life from a distance, down to the street view, where “the practitioners of the City” are making the city their own through walking. In late second-century Smyrna, the walkers were, indeed, creating their own spaces through the formation of their walking routes that helped to create their perceived experiences of the city, and that, in turn, changed the experience of others walking throughout the basilica. These walkers created their city through their walking, but they also altered it through their appropriation of physical space. This appropriation could be of physical space, such as where the walkers walked and loitered and gathered with other city dwellers. This is certainly the case in Smyrna, but the possibility of graffiti offers an additional kind of appropriation. Without an analysis of the content of the graffito itself, a graffito acts like a GPS tag, saying “I WAS HERE.” The fun of studying this material comes when we are able to understand the content, see its location, and wonder how the writer or reader experienced it. As Rebecca Benefiel (2010) has noted, graffiti have long been studied for their textual content, but not necessarily as archaeological evidence. Within a space such as the Basilica of the Agora of Smyrna, the large size allows us to hypothesize relationships between writer and graffito, graffito and location, and location within the larger built environment. An endeavor to understand graffiti such as the sample from this basilica would be incomplete without some acknowledgment of the key role that movement plays in the perception of graffiti.

Within the Basilica of the Agora in Smyrna, graffiti were used by early Christians to strengthen their identity, advocate for their presence, and aid in their prayers. In a community that censures their religious beliefs in varying degrees of oppression and persecution, even a few marks written by Christian hands demonstrates agency within the early Christian movement and can make a bold statement advocating for their space among the rest of Smyrna.

## References

### Primary Sources

The Ancient Graffiti Project, <http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/>

*The New Standard Revised Version Bible.*  
<https://www.bible.com/versions/2016-NRSV-new-revised-standard-version>

*The Septuagint LXX: Greek Translation of Hebrew Scriptures.*  
<https://www.septuagint.bible/home>

Bagnall, R., Casagrande-Kim, R., Ersoy, A., & Tanriver, C. (2015). *Graffiti from the Basilica in the Agora of Smyrna*. Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University Press.

Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, B., Aland, K., & Newman, Barclay Moon (2001). *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th Edition). Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

### Secondary Sources

Bagnall, R. (2011). *Everyday writing in the Graeco-Roman East*. University of California Press.

Bagnall, R. (2015). Baite. In R. Bagnall, R. Casagrande-Kim, A. Ersoy, & C. Tanriver (Eds.), *Graffiti from the Basilica in the Agora of Smyrna* (pp. 77–78). Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University Press.

Bagnall, R. (2015). Christianity. In R. Bagnall, R. Casagrande-Kim, A. Ersoy, & C. Tanriver (Eds.), *Graffiti from the Basilica in the Agora of Smyrna* (pp. 79–82). Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University Press.

Bagnall, R. (2018). Christianity in the Smyrna Graffiti. *Early Christianity*, 9(2), 215. <https://doi.org/10.1628/ec-2018-0013>

Benefiel, R. (2010). Dialogues of ancient graffiti in the House of Maius Castricius in Pompeii. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 114(1), 59–101. <https://doi.org/10.3764/aja.114.1.59>

- Chaniotis, A. (2014). Graffiti and social history of Aphrodisias. *Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens Bulletin*, 11, 18–23.
- Chaniotis, A. (2016). Memory, commemoration & identity in an Ancient City: The case of Aphrodisias. *Daedalus*, 145(2), 88–100. [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00379](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00379)
- De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press.
- Garipzanov, I. (2018). *Graphic Signs of Authority in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 300-900*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198815013.003.0002>
- Hasluck, F.W. (1913/1914). The ‘Tomb of S. Polycarp’ and the topography of Ancient Smyrna. *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 20, 80–93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30096466>
- Mitchell, S. (1995). *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor Volume II: The Rise of the Church*. Clarendon Press.
- Robertson, P. (2014). De-spiritualizing Pneuma: Modernity, religion, and anachronism in the study of Paul. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 26, 365–383.
- Stern, K. (2018). *Writing on the Wall: Graffiti and the Forgotten Jews of Antiquity*. Princeton University Press.
- Stern, K. (2023). Does smoke mean fire? Illumination, incense, and the senses in Late Antique synagogues. *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 16(1), 189–237. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jla.2023.0008>