

Champion, Matthew: *Medieval Graffiti. The Lost Voices of England's Churches*. London: Ebury Press 2015. ISBN: 9780091960414; 272 S.

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Graffiti are widely regarded as anti-social and destructive, as unacceptable behaviour, and to modern eyes little more than vandalism. So „why should we devote time to discovering and recording ancient acts of anti-social destruction?“ (p. xi)

This book of Matthew Champion, who started the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey<sup>1</sup> five years ago, provides answers beyond the common association of the idle scratchings of bored choirboys. Since 2010, the author has lead a survey of more than 650 churches in the county of Norfolk alone, identifying more than 25,000 different graffiti images over the years. In Europe, in general, a number of surveys of antique graffiti exist, but so far only very few have focused on medieval graffiti inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> This situation currently appears to be changing in England, and this volume harvests some valuable data.

Champion's book contains 21 chapters, a glossary, acknowledgements and additionally a gazetteer: selected sites to visit as well as an index. It does not contain a bibliography except for some works (Violet Pritchard<sup>3</sup>) which are cited in the text, but it is well-resourced with original pictures, 43 coloured, and 33 black and white drawings.

In the first part, comprising three sections „1. In the beginning“ (pp. 1–6), „2. Researching graffiti“ (pp. 7–12) and „3. Dating graffiti“ (pp. 13–22), the author provides a more general introduction to the field of researching medieval graffiti. The dating is quite intriguing in particular, as it requires a methodology of its own. In general – and this seems to be the case for the whole of Europe – it is a question of pre- or post-Reformation (p. 15). In some few instances, Champion manages to date text graffiti within a rather precise time period by ascribing them to possible historical persons like Robert Fulsham (1415) or John Abthorpe (1460–1490) or John Lydgate (before 1451). The description of the contexts of the

graffiti seems rather excellent, but it is a pity that the book at times lacks images of the discussed graffiti inscriptions. Even the possibilities of using the „terminus post/ante quem“ is vividly shown in the instance of the pillars at All Saints church, Litcham, where the graffiti were inscribed between 1412, the time of construction of the arcade, and a layer of limewash created in 1547. Champion correctly points out that the limewash layers represent one of the most important conditions for graffiti inscriptions to survive over time. The main dating problem for graffiti before 1550 seems to be the fact that the date was unimportant to devotional graffiti (p. 21).

The second part of the book contains a list of possible interpretations of the different kinds of medieval graffiti. The character of the graffiti is often apotropaic, like in chapter „4. Protecting the spirit: ritualistic graffiti“ (pp. 23–29), where the power of endless knots is described as a protective power since spirituell powers like demons will follow the line to its end, thereby trapping themselves within the symbol (p. 28). Also the „Compass-drawn designs“ (pp. 29–44) in chapter 5 seem to be ritual protection markings (p. 37). In chapter „6. The demons on the wall: pentangles“ (pp. 45–52) Champion shows that the extremely ancient symbol of pentangles is seldom in Norfolk's churches although it could have been viewed as a potent protection from demons (p. 49). The examples of the following chapters („7. Swastikas and the Virgin: witch marks“, pp. 53–60; „8. Crosses of faith“, pp. 61–70; „9. Magic on the walls: charms and curses“, pp. 71–82) cannot often be explained in a straightforward manner. The meaning of the crosses of faith seemed to be related to its location next to the church doors as a part of medieval „church services, such as marriage ceremony, the churching of women after childbirth and the burial service“ (p. 65).

The third part of the book contains descriptions and interpretations of „10. Voyages over stone: ship graffiti“ (pp. 83–96) and

<sup>1</sup> Website of the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey: <<http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk/>> (23.01.2016).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Blindheim, *Graffiti of Norwegian Stave Churches c. 1150-c.1350*, Oslo 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Violet Pritchard, *English medieval graffiti*, Cambridge 1967.

„11. Men of the stones: architectural graffiti“ (pp. 97–108). While the ship graffiti display a broad range between simple doodles and actual devotion, and their presence within churches was common place (p. 90), the architectural inscriptions are not what we would technically consider graffiti (p. 99), but can offer new perspectives on the development of church architecture.

The fourth part groups personal marks: „12. The chivalric code: heraldic graffiti“ (pp. 109–122), „13. Mason’s marks“ (pp. 123–130) and „14. Men of wealth and power: merchant’s marks“ (pp. 131–140). The heraldry relies on colour (p. 114), which lacks in graffiti contexts except for cross-hatching and shading and makes it difficult to connect the heraldic graffiti to certain families. Champion suggests that the heraldic designs in Norfolk may well have had a religious or spiritual significance and they were probably continental in origin (p. 116). Despite the fact that „mason’s marks are quite distinctive and separate from the more common graffiti“ (p. 125) and commonly seen as a simple form of quality control to calculate the payments, the marks’ designs tend to be re-used and the total frequency of the marks is rather unexpected. Similar problems appear with the abundance of merchant’s marks, which Champion argues could be signs rather for specific guilds (p. 136) than for specific persons.

Rarities are grouped together in a fifth part: „15. Of knights and dragons“ (pp. 141–152), „16. The passing of the hours: Mass dials“ (pp. 153–160), „17. Birds, fish, puffins and pilgrims“ (pp. 161–172) and „18. The music of faith“ (pp. 173–184). Dragons and other beasts were common decorative motifs on manuscripts and in sculpture in the late Saxon church, but „Dragons don’t often appear as graffiti inscriptions“ (p. 143) in Norfolk. The situation is similar with regards to St. George as a special saint of England with a large number of wall paintings and only very few depictions in the graffiti inscriptions. Armed men and knights can be found in large quantities among the graffiti, showing typical types of armour for certain time periods. After a necessary excursion, Champion sums up that „there has never been a single graffiti in England that can be positively linked

to the Knights Templar“ (p. 152). Mass dials<sup>4</sup> seem to show the approximate time of individual church services; there is a large number of instances. But because they are to be found even on the north side and inside of churches Champion argues that none of these really seem to make any sense.

In the last three chapters „19. Death stalks the walls“ (pp. 185–196), „20. The Reformation and beyond ... a bit“ (pp. 197–210) and „21. Postscript“ (pp. 211–214), Champion shows that graffiti may act as a more permanent memory of events (p. 189). This is shown with regards to some of the best-known graffiti inscriptions relating to the plague, which can be found in Ashwell church. The Reformation shifted the graffiti context and style: most obviously, dates began to appear in the graffiti inscriptions, and there is a general shift away from devotional inscriptions. Instead, an increasing number of „I was here“-graffiti and new types of graffiti images appear. In summary, military activities become a powerful theme in post-Reformation church graffiti.

In conclusion, Champion employs a rather broad concept/definition of the term „graffiti“. It seems that every symbol which was „scratched“ in the surface of the material of the churches is a graffiti. While older research considered the character of the scratching act as more spontaneous or impulsive and not planned<sup>5</sup>, Champion’s definition is more inclusive, noting that „nothing within the explanation of early graffiti is ever so simple or straightforward“ (p. 166). His view sheds new light on the medieval graffiti inscriptions, and especially his views on distribution patterns show a lot of changed meanings. This book is a first step towards presenting the results of an outstanding project to a broader public. The walls of the medieval churches harbour much more information than previously thought and shed new light on the everyday life of medieval contemporaries – not in the context of the modern idea of anti-social destruction, but in an often devotional and always personal sense. After these first steps,

<sup>4</sup> The British Sundial Society: <[http://sundialsoc.org.uk/dials\\_menu/mass-dials/](http://sundialsoc.org.uk/dials_menu/mass-dials/)> (23.01.2016).

<sup>5</sup> Detlev Kraack / Peter Lings, *Bibliographie zu historischen Graffiti zwischen Antike und Moderne*, Krens 2001.

we are looking forward to the next surprising unveiled results.

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