

# Curator Interview

## *Graffiti as Devotion along the Nile: El-Kurru, Sudan*

The Kelsey's next special exhibition presents the interesting discovery of ancient and medieval graffiti at a temple and pyramid at the site of El-Kurru in northern Sudan. Exhibition co-curators Geoff Emberling (co-director of the El-Kurru project and associate research scientist at the Kelsey) and Suzanne Davis (conservator at El-Kurru and associate curator for conservation at the Kelsey) sat down recently to discuss graffiti at El-Kurru.

**Suzanne:** How do you know these are religious graffiti and not just the scratchings of bored people passing the time?

**Geoff:** Two reasons: the subjects of the graffiti and the fact that they are concentrated in certain locations. The graffiti include a large proportion of ancient and medieval religious images, like the ram of the god Amun (fig. 1), offering tables and horned altars, at least one church. Images of boats may refer to religious processions on the Nile. And the most common mark on the temple walls are the little holes that we think were dug by pilgrims so that they could ingest the essence of the temple — for health or fertility. There are lots of other images that are not clearly religious, like horses, birds, giraffes, textiles, and human figures. It's not clear if we just don't understand the ways those were religious, or if there were other motivations. But graffiti at El-Kurru are concentrated in two locations — the funerary temple and the facing stones of the largest pyramid at the site. That suggests a deliberate concentration of activity around important monuments in the landscape.

**Suzanne:** I know that you can't carbon date carved graffiti like those at El-Kurru, because stone doesn't contain carbon. So how can you tell how old they are?

**Geoff:** It's difficult to be certain — we can't date the graffiti directly and they do not have a clear archaeological stratigraphy that gives us even a relative date. We do have some ways of making educated guesses, though.



Co-curators Suzanne Davis and Geoff Emberling doing their respective jobs at El-Kurru.



Figure 1. Graffito of the ram of Amun at the funerary temple at El-Kurru. Photo: International Kurru Archaeological Project.

We found some archaeological layers in the temple that were probably associated with the carving of some of the graffiti. Those layers included a bunch of jars set upside down into the ground and with their bases broken off so they could serve as braziers (probably for incense; fig. 2). We took carbon dating samples from those jars and got results that suggest that some ritual activity took place there between 100 BC and AD 100, during what is called the Meroitic period in Sudan.

We can also date certain motifs by their cultural associations and by parallels in other media, especially painted ceramics. One obvious hint is when a graffito



Figure 2. Jars dating to the Meroitic period from the funerary temple at El-Kurru. Photo by Suzanne Davis.

refers to a religious practice — the ram of Amun was almost certainly carved during the time that Amun was worshipped (a practice that ended by the 4th century AD in Nubia), and any Christian symbol like a cross or a church was carved after the arrival of Christianity in the 5th century AD.

**Geoff:** *In an article that you and fellow Kelsey conservator Carrie Roberts wrote, you talk about the El-Kurru graffiti as a “collection.” Is your conservation work with the graffiti similar to what you do with the Kelsey’s collection?*

**Suzanne:** Yes, but with the added dimension of the ancient monuments. So we’ve documented the individual graffiti much like a conservator or a collections manager would document a museum collection, and we’ve planned their conservation and care following the same general principles we would apply to the Kelsey’s collection. But with a site-based collection like the graffiti, you’re making all of these decisions not just for the “collection” but also for the structures they’re inscribed on. Thus, a huge part of our conservation planning involves maintaining the temple and the pyramid for the future.

Conserving the graffiti is also different because my work is based at the site of their creation, whereas in a museum setting you’re totally removed from the place of something’s production. Spending time in the funerary temple has been one of the best parts of my work at El-Kurru. Something about the space itself just feels really good, and everyone I know who has spent time there says the same thing (fig. 3).

**Geoff:** *Yes, it does have a very good feeling, and it makes sense to me that people would come to visit it, hundreds*

*of years after it was first built, and leave their marks there. Which brings me to my final question: do you have any suggestions about how I can integrate graffiti into my own spiritual practice?*

**Suzanne:** I do! You asked this as a joke, but it’s actually a good question. The key is not in the “graffiti” element of the El-Kurru graffiti, but in their character as devotional images. You can think about this question from two different angles: using imagery as a guide for spiritual practice, and making a meaningful mark as an act of devotion.

The first — using imagery as a guide for spiritual practice — is common in a lot of religious traditions. There are many devotional shrines with images of the Buddha, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Ganesh — the list could go on. The El-Kurru graffiti sometimes seem to function like this, for example, in images of ancient Kushite religious symbols. Today, in some traditions, it’s common for people to make a shrine for use at home, and this would be one way to incorporate images of people, places, or things you love into a daily devotional practice.

The second — making a meaningful mark as an act of devotion — is definitely true to the El-Kurru graffiti’s original character, but graffiti aren’t the only way to make a mark. We could use this idea to nurture ourselves spiritually and creatively in a lot of different ways — by planting a garden, cooking dinner for friends, or writing a note of gratitude. ▲

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**Mark your calendar!** *Graffiti as Devotion along the Nile* opens at the Kelsey Museum on August 23, 2019.



Figure 3. A view into the El-Kurru funerary temple. Photo by Suzanne Davis.