

MNHΣΘH: The Memory of the Living in Greek inscriptions from the Roman Empire: genesis, influences, meaning, typology

Graffiti are short and mostly private messages engraved on walls or rocks, sometimes considered insignificant and even incomprehensible. A good example recorded throughout the Roman world contained the Greek complex word MNHΣΘH, which derives from the verb 'to remember'. It was also very popular with its 700 occurrences in many regions of the empire between the 1st and 4th centuries AD. Apart from commemorating living people, little is known of its meaning. I focused on an ancient city called Dura-Europos in today's Syria on the Euphrates. 229 graffiti were discovered in this cosmopolitan city, which makes it a perfect place to analyse.

Solving the problem of its real meaning can be done by asking several different questions: What was the place where they were written? What do the closest graffiti mean? How did the Greek language evolve? Was Greek influenced by some neighbouring languages, such as Aramaic? Why did people write such graffiti? To whom did they leave these texts? Why did they need to be remembered?

Intellectuals made some earlier efforts to explain the meaning of the word MNHΣΘH on small objects like gems or glass cups and in graffiti. They proposed numerous grammatical solutions, and most believed these texts were religious and still repeated.

As a PhD student specialised in archaeology and above all epigraphy (the science studying inscriptions), I have gained solid knowledge in ancient languages (Latin, Greek and Aramaic) and learned how to understand inscriptions in their context, that is, in the place where they were found and their meaning in history.

When I started looking for all these graffiti and analysing them deeply, I noticed there was no religious context in some cases. This is why I proposed to look at these inscriptions not only as words but also as a specific human message. By doing so, I believe that those graffiti can give us more information and help us understand the past habits of the people who lived there then. My results could be used by other scholars (historians, archaeologists, linguists). At the same time, these outcomes will be possible because of the cooperation with other sciences like anthropology and psychology. The city of Dura-Europos would only be the beginning of a wider study.

It is also essential to look at the problem from several angles simultaneously. The context of a graffiti requires understanding it as a text with its chosen words, a message that is sometimes incised on a wall or painted, a dialogue between the writer and the reader, a place that was specifically chosen, and a language that seemed appropriate. I am also willing to associate several sciences from different backgrounds, for example, the so-called humanities that deal with human beings from the past, with social sciences, which are focused on today's people. Finally, I will analyse theories that can explain the phenomenon of graffiti and, at the same time, use statistics and digital methods to explain these inscriptions clearly and make them available to everyone.

Because I have already started working on these Greek graffiti for my PhD thesis, I have better knowledge and experience with these special sentences. Thanks to my project, I can continue working on them, find new results and develop better solutions. Within three years, I wish to reach several aims: I will finish my PhD thesis, extend my research to all the other regions outside Dura-Europos, make available online a map and a list of all the graffiti, answer new questions that were not yet analysed, and finally publish a book that will contain all the graffiti with MNHΣΘH. At the same time, I will also participate in scientific debates by writing papers and participating actively in conferences. However, I will not forget about popularising my discipline and the history of graffiti.