

Tagging sacred space in the Dura-Europos synagogue

Karen B. Stern

One day in the middle of the 3rd c.¹ a visitor scratched two simple words, “I (am) Hīya”, into a doorpost of the synagogue in Roman Dura-Europos. The Aramaic letters of the text are carved irregularly and largely enough to have been visible from the building’s elaborately decorated assembly hall. But unlike other elegantly painted inscriptions from the synagogue that clearly announce the names and donations of esteemed benefactors, the presence of this terse graffito, limited to a pronoun and a personal name, initially appears inexplicable. How, if at all, can we make sense of this crudely carved text, placed so ostentatiously in this sacred setting?

Modern society might explain this inscription as an outrageous defacement. Some would claim that only an impious or rebellious sort of person would dare to scrawl his name — a so-called *tag* — on a place of worship; according to these views, only social deviance or psychological disturbance might account for such activities.² But in regions of the ancient world, whether in Pompeii in the West or in Dura-Europos or Hatra in the East, such an act might have been interpreted quite differently. It would have been considered both unremarkable, because it was so common, and remarkable in a good way, because it offered a means for individuals to communicate with deities and like-minded devotees. Ubiquitous drawings of names, prayers, and cult images found around complexes like Pompeii’s temple of Isis and inside Durene temples and Hatran iwans suggest the acceptability, if not desirability, of applying graffiti to walls of cult centers and their precincts.³ Here I will draw attention to graffiti discovered on one building poised between the cultural worlds of Rome, Mesopotamia and Persia, the synagogue at Dura-Europos.

The building itself has achieved an unlikely fame; to those interested in Jewish populations of late antiquity, the Dura synagogue continues to loom large in the historical imagination. In 1932, excavators discovered the walls of its assembly hall largely intact and adorned with over 70 narrative paintings that included painted labeled images of Moses, Aaron, and other Biblical figures. Portions of the decorated ceiling were also preserved; so too were architectural elements of multiple construction phases, and a liturgical papyrus. The remarkable preservation of components of the Dura synagogue, as well as of its neighboring buildings, has justified continued reliance on its architecture, murals, and associated finds to interpret the social history of late ancient Jewish populations in Dura and to speculate about otherwise unattested practices associated with synagogues and Jewish populations elsewhere in Parapotamia, Mesopotamia and the Levant.

Despite the fame of the synagogue, several of its less glamorous elements, which of course cannot compete visually with the elegant commemorative dipinti on the ceiling or the polychromatic murals complete with labels on the walls, continue to elude scholarly

1 All subsequent dates refer to those of the present era, unless otherwise noted.

2 Studies of modern graffiti emphasize discrepancies between self-perceptions of graffiti artists and societies’ interpretations of their work. Recent treatments include Snyder 2009; Ferrell 1996, 2004.

3 This statement counters that in Langner 2001 as evaluated in Bagnall 2011, 25, n. 44. Langner’s assessment that graffiti are absent from pagan temples may relate to his focus on pictorial graffiti. Overview of Pompeian graffiti in Cooley and Cooley 2004; Benefiel 2010a and 2010b.