Sacred Signs or Mundane Scribblings?
A Survey of Medieval Graffiti in Tyrol

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Abstract

This article asks for the respective importance of mundane and religious aspects in pre-modern graffiti writing and reflects upon differences in education by class and gender of the graffiti writers. In contrast to most research in this field, the observations here are not based on the scrutiny of a specific site or an urban setting, but they consider the vast amount of graffiti from a whole region, the Tyrol. It is shown that a regional male elite ranks first amongst the graffiti writers and that their writings on walls served social purposes within this group. Here, women and lower classes were mainly absent. This questions our modern understanding of graffiti as ephemeral writing and as a spontaneous, faithful picture of society regardless of class: in fact, graffiti were often used for inscriptions with high durability, reminding of the dead or an act of donation toward a church or chapel. Their content was rather conform with conservative ideas and – in contrast to other regions – did only rarely touch directly upon political issues, although indirect reflexes on the process of Confessionalization can be observed. At the same time, the communication with the beyond has been another reason for graffiti writing. In drawing gallows, devils, and religious symbols on church walls, their writers tried to reach beyond the community of the living, too.

Keywords: *Donation, Gallows, Gender,* Memoria*, Social Class*

1. *Introduction*

In the well-known account of his travels to the Holy Land, Dominican Friar Felix Fabri gives a vivid description of travel and pilgrimage at the end of the fifteenth century. In one passage, he remarks on one of the annoying customs of his fellow pilgrims: against the wishes of the care takers, with sharp iron instruments, pilgrims would engrave their coats of arms and their names on walls and columns of churches in the holy sites. Fabri claims to have seen one such pilgrim himself, pretending to pray whilst shielding with his elbows the clandestine deed of inscribing his signs on Mount Calvary. Filled with indignation, Fabri does not convey a positive reading of such acts: these were not the signs of the pilgrims' nobility (coats of arms), but rather

of their stupidity, memorializing forever their simple-mindedness ('orare se simulabant, et circumpositis brachiis occulte acutissimis instrumentis insculpebant scuta cum signis, non dico nobilitatis sed stultitiae suae in perpetuam suae fatuitatis memoriam', Fabri 1843, 94).[1] To a modern reader, this evaluation of the act of graffiti writing is easily understandable, because it resonates with many of our own presumptions about this practice: is graffiti writing not a clandestine act, undertaken by an uneducated, foolish person in search of a fame that in the eyes of the educated is merely proof of the writer's poor manners? Moreover, it is punishable behaviour, even if the deed might be a petty crime. But, now as then, the phenomenon is more complex than such a simplified judgement would have it.

In this article, I argue that the interpretation given by Felix Fabri does not offer a full view of the phenomenon of graffiti writing at his time. Focussing mainly on the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the broader historic region of Tyrol, this case-study tries to underpin the argument that, at least in the Central Alps, graffiti were written by an educated male elite; that writing graffiti was part of the bonding practices of groups such as pilgrims or members of the administrative, governing, and wealthy classes; and, moreover, that writing graffiti was often neither clandestine nor banned, but might have had an important economic influence, now mainly lost due to the lack of written accounts about the income graffiti writing produced on a very regional level. That pre-modern graffiti writing was probably widely seen as legitimate by contemporaries has already been highlighted by earlier research (on English graffiti from the Tudor era by Fleming 1997, 2, and in more general terms by Tedeschi 2014, 365-366), although the example of Felix Fabri underscores that a multi-faceted approach is necessary to fully understand the phenomenon in all its regional and social diversity. In combining reflections on the public character of inscriptions in space with an eye toward social implications, I build on discussions about 'scritture esposte', led mostly by Italian historians and epigraphers (see, e.g., Petrucci 1985; Petrucci 1986; Ciociola 1997; Niccoli 2010). I will show that the case for the Tyrol is different, though, since it is predominantly material that does not belong to an urban culture that is under close scrutiny here. Armando Petrucci's reflections on literacy and the presence of writing in public spaces can be most useful, since the ability to read and write also seems to have been a major driving force behind graffiti production in rural areas during the late medieval and early modern period.

After offering a critique of Felix Fabri's notions about graffiti writing and bringing a certain reassessment of the picture, at least for the case of pre-modern Tyrol, this article discusses the extent to which we can read graffiti as a means for conveying a message addressed to the public or to specific people; although, in many cases, this might have been the aim, other aspects of the material also strongly hint at the relationship of the graffiti towards the otherworldly, the sphere of sanctity, of God, and, of course, of its counterpart, the world of demons. This article contributes to a broader reinterpretation of medieval graffiti, using the term 'medieval' in the sense given by Jacques Le Goff (2014), as a more flexible concept that includes the early modern period as well. This article considers graffiti from an era roughly stretching from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries and attempts to offer some fresh insight into a phenomenon not yet fully understood by what is, fortunately, an ever-increasing amount of research on this kind of written sources.

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[1] 'They pretended to pray, but behind their folded arms they secretly incised their coat of arms with sharp instruments, showing the emblems not of their nobility, but, as I want to put it, of their stupidity as eternal markers of their simple-mindedness'. Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

2. *Sigismund Sultzperger and the State of Current Research*

Visitors of Frundsberg Castle in Schwaz, in Northern Tyrol, can climb the belfry steps to reach a well-decorated chamber, depicting scenes of wildlife and coats of arms, dating to the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Much to the astonishment of modern visitors, people had already begun writing their own names on the very same wall during the sixteenth century. Not only did they do so willingly, but also openly, without any shame or restraint. Using red chalk (*Rötelstift*) or a sharp instrument such as a nail, they searched for the best spot on the painting to ensure their text was visible. A barber, possibly attached to the nearby court in Innsbruck (he appears to call himself 'Gabrielus Tonsor Neapoletanus 1592', which would make him an Italian craftsman), used the red framing of a painted window for his inscription, resulting in bright, white letters which immediately catch the eye. Another writer who was engaged in shipping activities on the River Inn did the same, adding to his name a picture of one of the commercial vessels used on the Alpine river, thus providing evidence of the role of the river as a major trade route during the sixteenth century, as it was used to supply the huge silver and salt mines in the Tyrol with grain, meat and other food from Bavaria (Kießling 2004; Flatscher 2017). In contrast, one Sigismund Sultzperger used red chalk for his inscription, searching for a white surface within the painting; he found it in the frame of another window depicting an architectural setting with a small turret, next to which Sigismund placed his graffiti (figure 1). Writers like him must have been fully aware that these graffiti were very visible. An important part of the graffiti of the fifteenth and sixteenth century were clearly not clandestine scribblings or vandalism by tourists, but serious attempts to communicate, mainly directed at a large audience from the elite to which the writers often belonged and already conceptualised with a certain durability in mind.
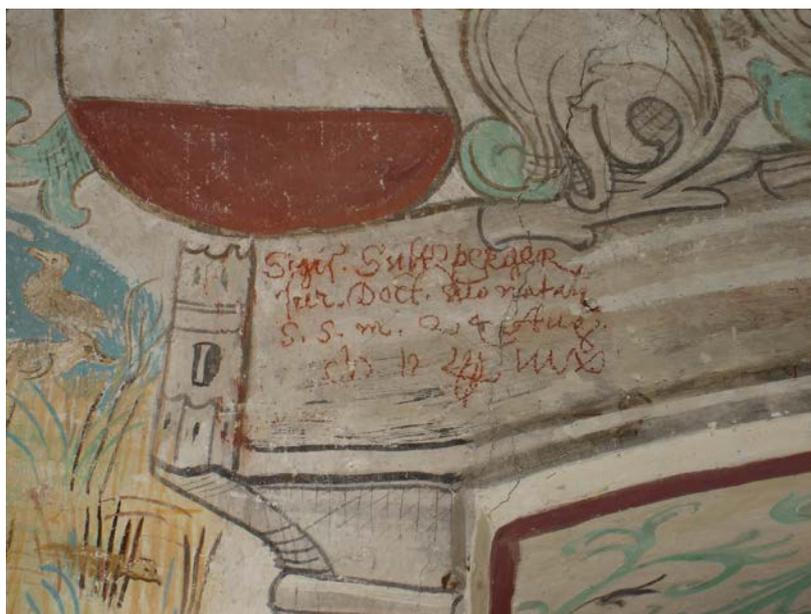
Figure 1 – The graffito by Sigismund Sultzperger in Frundsberg Castle, Schwaz, Northern Tyrol.
Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

The inscription by Sigismund Sultzperger also underlines this hypothesis by its content. He starts with the words: 'Sigis(mund) Sultzperger / Jur. Doct.', thus offering us a first insight into his social status: Sigismund not only allowed clear recognition of his person, since he added his surname (many modern graffiti writers try to conceal their precise identity to uninitiated readers in order to avoid prosecution by restricting legibility and certainly omitting their surnames), but he also added his academic title of Doctor of Law. He was thus the member of the social elite in the Tyrol, and it seems likely that he knew the castle warden, his local peer. The graffiti need not be a sign to highlight the decay of the structure or a lack of attention to its maintenance, but can rather be understood as a means of reaffirming authority by linking the writer to the ruling class. I will show that this is not an isolated and exceptional case, but a consistent motif in the historic graffiti found in the Tyrol. One of the most obvious arguments lies in the fact that, out of several hundred graffiti produced in the late middle ages and the early modern period, only a handful of female writers can be traced as authors, and the graffiti by women tend to appear later and to be largely products of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Even women from a higher social class, it seems, were either unable to write, hinting at educational differences in the late-medieval Tyrol, or they did not have the social accessibility their male counterparts enjoyed, enabling them to reach the frescoes in castles, churches and chapel choirs to record their names and ideas for posterity. It is thus by no means a coincidence that we encounter a man like the jurist Sigismund Sultzperger in the graffiti scrutinized here, and his case offers a good starting point to open up the reflection about medieval and early modern graffiti from the Tyrol.

The case of Sigismund also underlines a third aspect: scholarly research into graffiti is a relatively new field of study, and in order to understand Sigismund's graffiti it is necessary to dig deeper than just reading one single example. This article is based on my work on graffiti in the historic region of the County of Tyrol. This region today comprises the autonomous provinces of Alto Adige and Trentino in Italy, and Northern and Eastern Tyrol, i.e. today's province of Tyrol in Austria. A myriad of historic graffiti has survived throughout this area and this wealth of material has only partially been documented and studied (as a consequence, I cannot always cite a reference to each of the graffiti, since this article is also the fruit of unpublished fieldwork). The first volume of the edition of medieval and early modern inscriptions in the Tyrol included several graffiti from the upper Inn valley in Northern Tyrol (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013), and several series of graffiti were studied in the town of Hall in Tirol (Schmitz-Esser 2006a, 2006b, 2010) and in the Cistercian Monastery of Stams (Schmitz-Esser 2003). Projects on the graffiti on the altar piece in Castle Tyrol near Meran/ Merano, currently part of the collection of the Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck (Hörmann-Thurn und Taxis *et al.* 2011), on the graffiti on the kitchen walls in Runkelstein Castle in the vicinity of Bozen/Bolzano (Bechtold 2000), and on the series of graffiti in the chapel of Bruck Castle in Lienz, Eastern Tyrol (a project currently under way at the University of Graz, in cooperation with the castle museum – this series alone has well over 750 readable graffiti!), have led to better understanding of the role of graffiti in the context of castles in the region. The seminal study by Detlev Kraack (1997) on graffiti left by nobles on their pilgrimages to the Holy Land also traced some of the writings by these noblemen in the Tyrol. The latter examples will not be repeated here, since most experts in the field will know about the work by Detlev Kraack (2005), allowing us to concentrate on newer findings that complement Kraack's research. Although these studies have shed some

light on the situation in the region, large part of the graffiti in the Tyrol remains unexplored, thus leaving much space for further investigation.

Graffiti are often underestimated as historical sources. There is a practical reason for this that becomes clear immediately once we ask ourselves what part of the Humanities graffiti belong to. Graffiti are certainly not part of the every-day material in our archives and this leaves many historians in doubt as to whether this is their business, even when they have the palaeographic skills to deal with this kind of material. As a result, in-depth palaeographic analyses of graffiti are scarce (for one such exception, see the work of Tedeschi 2012). Art historians do the field work and uncover them, but often lack sympathy with sources of this kind, which appear to do little more than destroy the main objects of their research, and neither palaeography nor social history are commonly their area of expertise (again, there are exceptions to this rule, too, see e.g. Plesch 2010, 2018). Archaeologists do not normally have the time to deal with hundreds of graffiti and again neither their focus nor their skills are dedicated to working with these sources (here, one can quote the current graffiti survey in England as an initiative to overcome the problem; cf. Champion 2015). The interdisciplinary gap is bridged by epigraphy, but most epigraphists follow a definition that fosters the publicity and durability of the inscriptions (Favreau 1997, 31), or they focus on a definition that regards inscriptions as writing made by writing tools not pertaining to the sphere of the chancery (Kloos 1992, 2). I would like to argue that both definitions must include graffiti, since there are hints that at least some of them were meant to reach a specific public and achieve permanency: although they might have been written with pen and ink or sometimes even with red chalk, which was used for writing on paper, other common writing tools were made of sharpened iron (such as nails); the surfaces on which graffiti were written were neither paper nor parchment, but walls, beams, metal and the like (for more on the definition of graffiti, see Kraack and Lingens 2001, 9-10).

There is also a second, less theoretical and more prosaic reason for the relative disinterest of research in medieval and early modern graffiti: their frequently very precarious state of conservation, the poor legibility of the material with its insecurities and the difficulty of tracing the graffiti left on walls can make checking the results of this kind of research a tricky business (see, e.g., the recent remarks by Champion 2018). This leads us straight back to Sigismund Sultzperger. His graffito is difficult to read and shows traces of his own, very personal style of writing. Out of hundreds of graffiti, his would not have come under special scrutiny, had it not been for the enthusiastic research undertaken by genealogist Sebastian Neumann. While researching his ancestors, he recently contacted me and offered a great deal of insight that added flesh to the dry bones of the inscription in Frundsberg Castle. According to Neumann's research, Sigismund was born in 1547 and was appointed advocate at the court of Archduke Charles II of Inner Austria in Graz. Leaning toward protestant ideas, he became one of the victims of the Counter Reformation and left Styria together with his sons Johann Rupert and Siegmund Friedrich during the reign of Archduke Ferdinand II. The family found refuge in Saxony, where Sigismund died in 1603 in Dresden (Lesser 2015, 165; Halbedl-Herrich 2015, 154, 251 n. 1112). Moreover, Neumann had succeeded in finding a book that had belonged to Sigismund, containing a copy of the *Explicatio et continuatio titulorum Iuris Civilis & Canonici* by Melchior Kling and some other juridical treatises, which well fitted his professional interests. On the cover, he named himself as 'Sigismundus Sultzpergerus Tyrolensis' and dated the acquisition to 28 March 1571 (Universitätsbibliothek, Salzburg,

Ms. R 96.277 I).[2] He used a peculiar 'M' and 'D' for the Roman dating, thus enabling us to understand the rest of the text in his graffiti and leaving no doubt that the owner of the book and the writer of the graffiti were one and the same. Only the cooperation of researchers with different backgrounds and interests had allowed a better understanding of this graffito, and together with my thanks to Sebastian Neumann for sharing his results with me, this article is meant to be an appeal for further collaboration in this field.

3. *Writing Skills, Gender Exclusion and the Practice of Graffiti-Making by the (Male) Elite*

Not only do Sigismund's graffiti name him as a Doctor of Law, but they also state that he is a notary of His Majesty's (s.s.m. – *suae sacrae maiestatis*), which dates the graffiti probably to 1577 (the correct date is a little difficult to discern since there seems to be an unclassical 'IIIX' at the end; if this reading is correct, the Roman letters mean 1577). Why did he inscribe himself in this setting in the most representative room in the belfry? As already mentioned, he was not alone: one Christian Kholler seems to have been either a toll keeper or a boatman on the River Inn, the barber Gabriel might have been attached to the court in Innsbruck and several more men named themselves, sometimes giving away their origins. One group from 1658 apparently came from the Southern Tyrol, since one of them names himself as 'Eppanensis', thus coming from Eppan/Appiano (figure 2). The wine from this region was one of the major trade goods in the area and, consequently, their presence here could hint at them being part of the wine trade, be it as wine merchants or hauliers of this precious good (as to the trade in the Inn Valley, see Schmitz-Esser 2017). Although this must remain a hypothesis, the geographic situation (in the lower Inn Valley, at the trading post of Schwaz) and the context (with other graffiti reflecting trading and shipping along the river) make this highly probable. In simple terms: whenever more can be said about the people concerned than the bare fact of their names, it begins to emerge that they belonged to a regional elite of court officials, administrators, traders or well-to-do craftsmen. It appears likely that graffiti in surroundings of this kind can be linked to similar series produced in officially-sanctioned wall paintings, such as the coats of arms in drinking halls (*Trinkstuben*) or court houses (*Richterhäuser*), as can still be found in Bruneck/Brunico (Pustertal, Southern Tyrol) or Pfunds (Upper Inn Valley, Northern Tyrol; see Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 255-262, cat. no. 273).

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[2] <http://www.ubs.sbg.ac.at/sosa/webseite/vorbesitzers.htm>, accessed 10 January 2020.
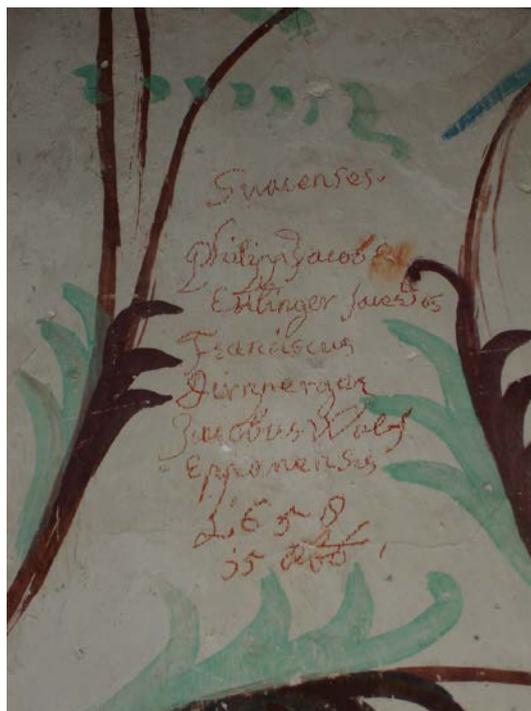
Figure 2 – Graffiti by a group of wine merchants in Frundsberg Castle, naming one of them as 'Eppanensis' (third line from below). Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

That a certain social situation – and possibly a male ritual of some sort, a display of togetherness – stood behind the creation of some graffiti series seems likely when we consider another, although exceptional, example. Within the old thirteenth-century bell of the church of the Cistercian monastery in Stams, some chalk graffiti have survived, naming amongst others one Mathaeus Steger in the year 1561 and one Hans Kennastein. Upon scrutiny, it emerges that these people were not vandals, but members of the congregation: Kennastein was a minister in one of the parishes belonging to the monastery, Steger a prior of the abbey (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 70-71, cat. no. 54; see Schmitz-Esser 2003, 92). Out of the many graffiti on the fresco of Christ the Saviour in a Church in Hall in Tirol, it has been possible to identify the Parish Priest of Absam and Hall, Johannes Hamerspach, in a very small graffito. With some humour, he inscribed himself with the words: 'hic fuit johannes de hamerspach la la la' (Schmitz-Esser 2010, 61). In the same series, the regionally influential nobleman Hans Franz of Wehingen named himself and the year 1563 (Schmitz-Esser 2006a, 115). Next to them, a group of craftsmen from the city: a mason, a barber and a girdler also named themselves (Schmitz-Esser 2006a, 112, 114, 116, 120). That they did so using Latin forms for their trades (*Murator, Tonsorus, Cinctor*), gives a clue about the language used for acquiring writing skills by the urban elite during the sixteenth century: Latin was clearly important in the education of this social group, too. The fact that we have to include these craftsmen with the upper crust of urban society is underlined by the fact that they received such an education. Once again, it is the affluent male elite that we can perceive here as a major group amongst the writers of the graffiti.

Since writing skills were the necessary prerequisite for creating graffiti, it is not surprising that we only find members of a specific social class among our writers. Nor is it surprising that their

social origin appears to broaden during the course of the early modern period, extending from the original core of noblemen and clerics to include burghers, craftsmen and students or pilgrims, traders and musicians as the centuries pass (Schmitz-Esser 2006b, 104-105). It is noteworthy, however, that women did not play a significant role amongst the writers of graffiti in the Tyrol and this finding complements similar, recent observations for Styrian graffiti from the same period (Stelzer 2016, 46). Their part in graffiti writing seems to have been no more than marginal. There are some sporadic cases, such as the inscription by one Maria, dating her visit to the chapel choir of Frundsberg Castle in Schwaz to April 1620. On the same wall, in 1660, a butcher's serving lad inscribed himself as such ('1660 Jar Mezer Knecht') and added a butcher's axe to make sure everyone got his message. Thus, even the relatively simple helping hand of a tradesman's supplier inscribed his name in the same place as Maria, whose surname is unfortunately no longer clearly legible, thus leaving us in doubt as to her exact social background. The fact that out of hundreds of graffiti in the church of Our Saviour (*Salvatorkirche*) in Hall in Tirol not one female writer could be identified adds further mystery to this perplexing fact: most of the graffiti date from a time when the church housed a convent of Augustinian nuns and many people from the region left their names and marks in their choir and on their main fresco of the Saviour behind the high altar – but not so the nuns themselves. In the context of the Cistercians and their bell inscriptions in Stams written at precisely this time, this absence is even more difficult to explain.

Answers to this remain so far unconvincing, but it might at least be worth doing some rethinking about the possibilities here. First, as already mentioned, a different education might lie behind the fact that only rarely did women create graffiti; according to Edith Ennen (1999, 194-195), after the later middle ages girls were increasingly excluded from higher education, and this exclusion extended to the daughters of both wealthy citizens and the peasantry. In contrast with Ennen's assessment, however, recent scholarship has stressed the role of mothers in educating their children and the use of books to transfer knowledge in late medieval families (Clanchy 2011; Sheffler 2015, 403). In fact, explaining the lack of female graffiti by gender inequality in education is less convincing in the case of the Augustinian Convent in Hall. Despite the negative prejudice of contemporary men, among women in religious communities writing and reading skills were especially common and widespread (Régnier-Bohler 2002, 543-552). In the case of the nuns from Hall, their monastery had to obey special rules, formulated at the end of the fifteenth century by the famous Cardinal and Bishop of Brixen/Bressanone Nicolaus Cusanus, who extended the Augustinian rules by 24 special chapters. These were written down for the nuns and sent to them, so the well-known Cardinal obviously assumed they had basic reading skills. The administrator of the nunnery during the early sixteenth century, Magdalena Götzner, was a member of the local nobility (Gratscher 1953; Nothegger 1953, 290-291; Grass 1970; Schmitz-Esser 2006a) and, again, it is therefore highly unlikely that she was unable to write. Secondly, there could have been social practices that differentiated gender roles, too, and the practice of writing graffiti might have been one of them. Were women not allowed access to places where graffiti were left? It seems plausible that they were not present at male gathering places such as drinking halls (*Trinkstuben*). But, although the church choirs where most of our graffiti are found might not have been open to women during mass, they were certainly allowed in to visit the relics as pilgrims, or to prepare for mass in the church of their own nunneries. Thirdly, the answer could lie in the fact that writing materials were not as readily available to women. Graffiti made by red chalk were probably created by using a pen with a chalk tip (*Rötelstift*). One such pen has been preserved as part of the collection in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (inv. no. Kunstkammer 4922; see Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, 2018). Dating to the seventeenth century, it is made of ivory and in the shape of a column, thus distinguishing it from a 'normal' feather-pen by its costly material and elitist iconography. Such a pen was kept in the hands – or

the pockets – of the male elite, but possibly not in their spouses'. But expensive pens of this kind had the best survival chances in museum collections, and we cannot be sure that every graffiti item was made with such an elaborate tool. Moreover, the practice of using a sharp object such as a nail must have been a possibility for women, too. To conclude these reflections briefly, our unsolvable riddle might hint that we are confronting the proof of a social practice that distinguished gender in pre-modern Tyrol, but nothing about it is (yet) certain.

It is obvious that writing skills and the daily practice of reading and writing amongst certain groups of men were related to the creation of graffiti. Clergymen often used graffiti to instruct their flock and church walls could be used by both laymen and clergy to disseminate a good, Christian lifestyle: '1543 O mensch las dier auf Erden nicht so lieb sein das du vergesest got des herrn',[3] an inscription in the chapel of Landeck Castle states (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 181-182, cat. no. 182). Not too far away, in the belfry of Berneck Castle in Kauns, we also discover the identity of a graffiti writer of this kind: '1578 O homo, Memorare nouisima tua. Anthonius Gachter Ex Aesteten, pastor in Serfaus', see, 197-198, cat. no. 204 (figure 3).[4] We do know something about Anthony Gachter, who was visited by episcopal investigators only the year before in his parish in Serfaus. Books with protestant content were confiscated and he had to dismiss his servant, who probably was his mistress. Thus, the moralising inscription is doubly interesting, since it might not only reflect the worries of a priest for his flock, but his inner reflection at times of conflict due to confessionalization. We can even guess which books he was reading at the time: the formula he used ('O homo, memorare novissima tua') appears several times in the forty-eighth sermon of the 'Sermones ad fratres in eremo', once thought to have been written by one of the church fathers, St. Augustine (Pseudo-Augustinus 1841, 1331-1332). It was thus certainly not forbidden by the episcopal inspectors he received the year before his own visit to the noblemen living at Berneck Castle, but was considered in line with a catholic, orthodox reading list.

Figure 3 – The graffito of Anton Gachter, a minister from Serfaus, in Berneck Castle, Kauns, Northern Tyrol. Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

[3] '1543 Oh man, do not be so enamoured by this life on Earth that you forget God the Lord'.
[4] '1578 Oh man, think of your ultimate fate. Anthony Gachter from Aesteten, minister in Serfaus'.

4. *Durability, Memoria and What You Wanted to Say With Graffiti*

Berneck Castle in Kauns offers more than just this one graffito, and it is worth taking a closer look at some of these. Shortly afterwards, two graffiti in red chalk were added to the castle chapel facade. One fits the picture of the inscriptions already mentioned, encouraging a Christian life in a rather stark rhyme: 'Hin geth die Zeit, her khombt der dod, o Mensch Gethue Recht vnd furchte Got' (see Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 221, cat. no. 228).[5] But the second inscription, probably by another hand, refers to dates in the building history of the chapel: 'Jm den Jar Christj 1437 Jar ist diße CaPelln ErPaut worden, darnach Jn dem Jar Christj (etc.) 1482 Geweich worden' (see *ibidem*).[6] This graffito took the construction date certified by a contemporary, fifteenth-century inscription in the chapel and added the date of its (or one of its) consecration(s). This was not meant to be just another graffito amongst others: it is carefully drawn within a rectangular field in the shape of a ribbon, giving it a more formal appearance. Graffiti could therefore replace their counterparts in painting or inscriptions in stone and thus to distinguish between graffiti and 'proper' inscriptions does not make much sense. They might aim at durability and public visibility, exactly as a formal definition of inscriptions demands (Favreau 1997, 31). Although this is not normally applied to graffiti at all, this observation falls in line with remarks recent graffiti research has already made (see e.g. Plesch 2015, 50). When, in 1544, Hans Gräfinger and Dorothea Altspaur took care that their coats of arms, family names and the date were painted in red chalk on the walls of the small chapel at the Alpine pass in Nassereith, they certainly wanted to commemorate something important, as they were members of the local nobility and were not two of the pilgrims who also used the chapel walls for their inscriptions (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 66, cat. no. 49; figure 4). The most likely explanation might be the fact that they had made a significant donation to maintain the chapel, so this was the inscription memorializing their good deed. The carefully-drawn coats of arms, the naming of both families, underlining the marriage alliance and the couple's status as nobility, and the visible positioning on a central wall of the chapel do support such a view.

Figure 4 – The Northern wall of the small chapel at the Fernpass, Nassereith, Northern Tyrol, shows the coat of arms of the Gräfinger and the Altspaur families. Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

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[5] 'There goes time, here comes death, oh man, do righteous deeds and fear God'.
[6] 'This chapel was built in the year of Christ, the year 1437 and was consecrated thereafter in the year of Christ (etc.) 1482'.

But the most obvious example of the intended durability of graffiti and their use as a cheaper alternative to 'regular' inscriptions in stone and paint is preserved in a small church close to Schönwies in the upper valley of the Inn, the church of St. Vigil in Obsaurs. On one of the inner walls of the church, a rectangular shape is filled with this inscription: '1543 Marta Kolbin leyt hye pegraben, gott gnat der sel vnd al glaibigen' (see Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 182, cat. no. 182 (figure 5).[7] Only its formal drawing in red chalk and informal placing on the wall make this a graffito. The text and content are similar to any normal tombstone inscription of the time, once more blurring the dividing lines between graffiti and other inscriptions. One could even speculate that it was an ephemeral monument, waiting to be replaced by a stone marker which was never done (Weniger 2016, 138). Since this graffito is intended to express the idea of *memoria* of the deceased, it must have been placed here with the intention of durability, and since it is still there after nearly five centuries, it has accomplished this task very well. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that such material, as frequent as it might have been in the sixteenth century, had less chance of survival than its counterpart in stone. This might be an explanation both for the rarity of such explicit examples and for the relative neglect of researchers for the possibility of graffiti being used as substitutes for formal inscriptions in a regional setting. Nevertheless, many well-studied series of graffiti hint at this, be they a coat of arms noblemen left on their way to the Holy Land (Kraack 1997) or the historical notices on the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (Miglio 1997). The influence of graffiti on historiography and on the literary production is understudied, although there are hints that graffiti might predate their counterparts in these genres (see the reflections in Miglio 1997, 62-63, and Fleming 1997, 8-10) – which would be evidence of their wide perception and erudite audience.

Figure 5 – This memorial inscription for Marta Kolb was written after her death on the Southern wall of the St. Vigil church, Obsaurs, Northern Tyrol. Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

Both examples, the graffiti of the Gräfinger couple at the Fernstein Chapel and the inscription recording Marta Kolb in Obsaurs, are part of a very similar setting: both are found on a chapel

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[7] '1543 Marta Kolb lies here buried. God have mercy upon her soul and [those of] all believers'.

wall and they are not the only inscription in red chalk on these walls. In both chapels, many other graffiti can be found, mainly dating from the sixteenth century. They were left by pilgrims. A group of pilgrims from Cambrai crossed the Alps here, passing Fernstein on their way to Rome. They recorded not only their city of origin and their names, but placed a pilgrim's staff crossed with a key (the symbol of St. Peter) next to their graffito. A coat of arms bearing the cross of Jerusalem and a scallop shell on the opposite wall testify to the many pilgrims heading for Rome or Venice (as the main port for those sailing to the Holy Land) who wrote on these walls. It was not unusual for a group of pilgrims to inscribe themselves simultaneously on the walls and they often used signs or moralising mottos to underpin their religious motivation. In the case of the Cambrai pilgrims, a sign of three overlapping fish in the shape of a triangle showed their Christian motivation. In Obsaurs, pilgrims used more outspoken mottos, such as 'Allß zeit vnd Zil gett wies gott wil' (see Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 194, cat. no. 199).[8] Several pilgrims wrote this text on the wall of the church and at least one group visiting the chapel in 1574 can be singled out. But similar mottos proliferate on the church walls and sometimes only capital letters hint at them – as, for example, 'WGW' for 'how it pleases God' (or 'according to God's will', as translated before: 'Wies Gott Will'; for more examples, 213-214, cat. no. 218, too). Such mottos were commonplace in sixteenth-century Tyrol and even became part of courtly culture (as evidenced by the 'Ambraser Trinkbücher', a guest book from Ambras near Innsbruck, with the addition of such mottos to the names of the visitors to the Habsburg court; Igálffy von Igály 2010), again hinting at the relatively distinctive social group such pilgrims at least aspired to. This is consistent with findings from Elizabethan England highlighting the use of readily available poetry in graffiti (Fleming 1997; Fleming 2001).

The combination of the pilgrims' graffiti, the naming of donors to the church and a memorial inscription on the same walls may be more than just a coincidence. As in other places, they certainly hint at devotional practice (see Plesch 2010, 157-161). But, even more so, they might refer to a socio-economic practice, too: as I have already argued above, the inscriptions might not have been clandestine, nor were they necessarily created without the knowledge of the owner of a church, chapel, or castle. This leads to the hypothesis that whoever wanted to inscribe his name on the walls of a church like the one in Obsaurs or at the Fernstein pass, had to pay to do so. Thus, a benefactor of the church, relatives who sought remembrance for a deceased loved-one or pilgrim groups wishing to leave their names at a place of worship they passed all ended up on the same wall, using the same technique. Although outspoken written sources for this practice have not survived, they exist in the case of some churches on the pilgrim routes to the Holy Land; it is likely that the rights to leave a graffito with a coat of arms here were given in exchange for donations (Kraack 1997, 312-313, 316, mentioning, among others, the cases of the monasteries of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai and St. Anthony in Candia). Moreover, we have hints of a somewhat similar practice on the cemetery walls of Gothic churches in the Tyrol: both the parish churches in Imst and in Matrei show a series of painted epitaphs that were created by different donors not long after the fifteenth-century church building project had been completed (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, xxi). Buying such a distinguished place for burial in a churchyard obviously meant some prestige for its owners and at the same time secured a certain pay-back for the building project. Unfortunately, we know little about financing church buildings in late medieval Tyrol, but we can guess that they were major undertakings by the whole parish, not only by princes, rich landlords and church authorities, as has been impressively shown for England at about the same time by Gabriel Byng (2017).

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[8] 'All time and purpose run according to God's will'.

Moreover, the scrutiny of Tyrolese graffiti indicates that pilgrimages and building patronage often could go hand in hand on a regional level. In the small church of St. Leonhard in Nauders, located on another crucial Alpine pass (the Reschen Pass/Passo Resia, connecting the Upper Inn valley to the Vinschgau/Val Venosta and the region around Meran/Merano), graffiti testify not only that visitors came from places nearby, as in the case of one Jacob Pach from Mals/Malles in Southern Tyrol, visiting the church in 1597 (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 215-216, cat. no. 221). Since Jacob returned in 1609 and added another graffito in the same church, we know that people visited the same place frequently and not just once. In the same series of graffiti, the explicit and proud remark of a donation to the church is made: 'Jch Josef Jäger als stifter dißes Gotshauß 1609 Jars', (215-216, cat. no. 221).[9] Pilgrims and donors both feature amongst our graffiti writers. We can sometimes see that the reason for travelling was more mundane, testifying as to the strong trading links in the region. There are graffiti hinting at travellers from St. Gallen and the Valais/Wallis (St. Georgen ob Tösens, 164-165, cat. no. 157), from Kaufbeuren (in the house of the clergy at Kals in Eastern Tyrol), from Prettin, in today's Saxony-Anhalt in Germany, from Füssen in the Allgäu and from Hainfeld in Lower Austria (St. Margaretha in Pians, 134-136, cat. no. 127). In these cases, trade links seem a more likely reason for the presence of graffiti writers in the Tyrol (as to the major trade links, see e.g. Noflatscher-Posch 1992; Schmitz-Esser 2017), although it is still difficult to be sure of the exact motivation to travel in each single case. In at least two cases, we can assume yet another reason for travelling: in Pians, one Brother Geoffrey Bodenhof called himself a 'scolaris' ('hic fuit fr[ater] gotfryd[us] bodenhoff […] sc[o]la[r]is', Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 134-136, cat. no. 127), and in Nauders one 'Johannes de Bamberga' wrote the year of his journey, 1515, and the Aristotelian motto 'Ens mobile', thus making it clear that he was a scholarly man and probably a student attending an Italian university at the time. He may quite possibly be identified with the Franciscan friar John of Bamberg who in 1493 had already ended his studies in Theology in Lipsia and had become a tutor to a Saxon prince in the following years (168-169, cat. no. 161).

In some cases, it seems that writers wanted to leave their mark in more than one church; the most prominent example found so far for the period around 1500 is one Lienhart von Maurn, who not only left his mark in the Romanesque choir of Stams monastery, but whose identical signature is to be found in the choir of the church of Our Saviour in Hall in Tirol (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 56, cat. no. 38; see Schmitz-Esser 2006a, 113-114). Here, we learn something about the way graffiti were thought fully placed on the wall, since Lienhart left the first three letters of his name on the brownish board of the main fresco in the church's choir, before he decided that a place a little further up the fresco, in the middle of the white gown of one of the dominant angels calling the dead to the Last Judgement, would be much more suitable for his inscription: the red chalk is still very visible on the white surface of this section of the fresco. But why did someone like Lienhart want his name to be inscribed on choir walls? This is difficult to explain, but the question is all the more pressing since it affects the vast majority of our graffiti, which only mark a visit with sparse wording. They rarely give away more than a 'hic fuit' followed by a name and the year of the visit. A random example is that by one Erhardus, who painted his name on the walls of the parish church at Gries close to Bozen/Bolzano, scribbling his coat of arms (maybe a star surrounded by a border of clouds), the year of his visit, 1441, and a 'hic fuit' followed by his name in red chalk on a

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[9] 'I, Joseph Jäger, as benefactor of this chapel, in the year 1609'.

stone (figure 6). It has not been possible to read his full surname and the coat of arms could not be identified in the relevant compendia on heraldry in the region, leaving us with not much to conclude from the inscription other than the date and the use of an all-too-common German name in the region.

Figure 6 – A certain Erhard placed his name, coat of arms and the date of his visit in 1441 on the walls of the church at Gries, Bozen/Bolzano. Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

But we should not underestimate the seemingly limited charm of the 'hic fuit' inscriptions, widely found in our material in Europe (see e.g. Miglio and Tedeschi 2012, 614; Tedeschi 2014, 368). Such inscriptions contradict the idea that graffiti of the time are more generally 'tending towards non-subjectivity' (Fleming 1997, 6), since they place an obvious emphasis on the individual. And even such limited information can, in some cases, be very useful as a clue to the history of a fresco or wall painting: in the case of the named fresco in Hall in Tirol, by analysing the graffiti it was possible to discern the date in the late sixteenth century when the Gothic picture became unfashionable and was whitewashed over (Schmitz-Esser 2006a, 119); in another case, at Imst, a 1515 graffito put in question the date of a fresco art historians had assumed to have been painted around 1530 (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 58-59, cat. no. 42). As useful as such graffiti might be to art historians as a *terminus post or ante quem*, their sparse information does not reveal the inner motivation for their creation, especially if the social background and origin of the writer remain unknown. Did people want to stay close to the sanctuary and prolong their presence, so that their names remained close to the altar and the relics even when they themselves were no longer present in the church? The frequent location in choirs and on altar pieces from the region (adding to the above-mentioned cases, see the altar piece scrutinized by Söding 2011) seems to confirm such an assumption. Or did people simply want to leave their mark, giving the practice a more touristic aspect? Lienhart's case seems to indicate that this is a viable interpretation of his motives. It may not be necessary to distinguish clearly between *memoria* and *fama*. Nevertheless, I would like to return to the question in the next chapter of this article.

In sharp contrast to today's graffiti, in our material from the Tyrol sex, politics and sports are entirely marginal. This might have to do not only with differing cultural aspects behind the act of graffiti writing, but very practical reasons of preservation might have played a significant role, too. Whereas Gothic and early-Renaissance frescoes in churches and especially in their choirs have survived in large numbers in the Tyrol, followed by wall paintings in formal rooms in the region's castles and on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century facades of inns, only rarely do the wall surfaces of kitchens or toilets survive to this day (for the best surveys on the topic so far, see Wagener 2014, and Niccoli 2010, 347, with her hint at Roman tavern scenes painted by Pieter van Laer, showing such graffiti on their seventeenth-century walls). Although the interiors of private houses may have been as full of graffiti as church walls, only the latter survive to this day in great number (as for Tudor England, this was hypothesized by Fleming 2001, 73-78; Fleming 1997, 3-4 and 15-19) and Elizabethan literature attests to the fact that, at least in England, political and sexual allusions were rather common in graffiti writing (Fleming 1997, 10-15). Where medieval wall surfaces have been preserved, as in Runkelste in Castle/Castel Roncolo close to Bozen/Bolzano in the Southern Tyrol, astonishingly explicit material can still be found. In this case, the graffiti in the kitchen mock the frescoes in the castle's *palas*, making the courtly allusions to worldly love in the paintings explicit in their crude sexual variations on the same themes (Bechtold 2000). But, although such a bias in our material seems highly likely, it cannot explain the nearly-total absence of such cases in the material from castles and urban dwellings with their otherwise rich material in graffiti; to give but two examples, one can name the Goldener Engl Inn at Hall in Tirol or the walls of the outer bailey of Kronburg Castle in Zams. In both cases, however, there are shapes similar to a hose with a round ending and a slit-like stroke (a man's penis?) and dots at the other end (pubic hair?), but since the drawing is usually bent in the middle at a 90-degree angle, the allusion to the male genitalia remains vague, leaving the possibility that another (innocent) explanation may be found in future research, e.g. a caricature of an early-modern tobacco pipe. The relative absence of explicit sexual allusions in secular graffiti settings is all the more astonishing in the light of recent research on secular badges and iconographies such as the penis-trees depicted in book illuminations and public frescoes (Ziolkowski 1998; McDonald 2006; Lindquist 2012). It is clear that graffiti had another main purpose, at least in the Tyrol, and that this lay more in the sphere of medieval pilgrimage and travel experience. Here, the special situation of the Tyrol as a major trade hub for the traffic crossing the Alps is visible in our source material.

This might well be the explanation for a further knowledge gap. Political statements are extremely rare. If we do not consider the graffiti calling for a moral life as political statements (which they might well have been in the sixteenth century, by evoking ideas about the reformation), there are almost no examples of graffiti reflecting on current politics or political events. This is in stark contrast to other regions in Europe, and again, the setting the graffiti are preserved in might be crucial here. In the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, Italy, for example, reflections on the court and courtly life are rather ubiquitous in the scribblings (Sarti *et al.* 2017, esp. 72-86; for other Italian examples of political criticism, see also Niccoli 2010, 349-352). War events were noted in late medieval graffiti in Bergamo, Verona, and Gavignano, for example (Weniger 2016, 134-135; Miglio and Tedeschi 2012, 620-621). There are German graffiti with such content, too, as evidenced by the well-known graffiti in the Villa Farnesina in Rome: on one of the walls painted with a lovely scenery of the countryside, a *landsknecht* soldier from Charles V's imperial army commented on the infamous Sacco di Roma in 1527: 'Was sol ich schreibenn und nit lachen, die lanzknecht haben(n) den babst lauffenn machen'[10] (see Esch 2004, 109; Guichard 2014, 41-42, figure 1, transcription slightly corrected; figure 7).

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[10] 'What shall I write without laughing? The *landsknecht* have made the Pope run'.

Since one of the most important generals in the war was Georg of Frundsberg, from the family that took its name from the already mentioned castle by the same name in Schwaz, the writer might well have been of Tyrolese, most certainly of Southern German origins. Nevertheless, similar graffiti have not been found (yet) in the region itself.
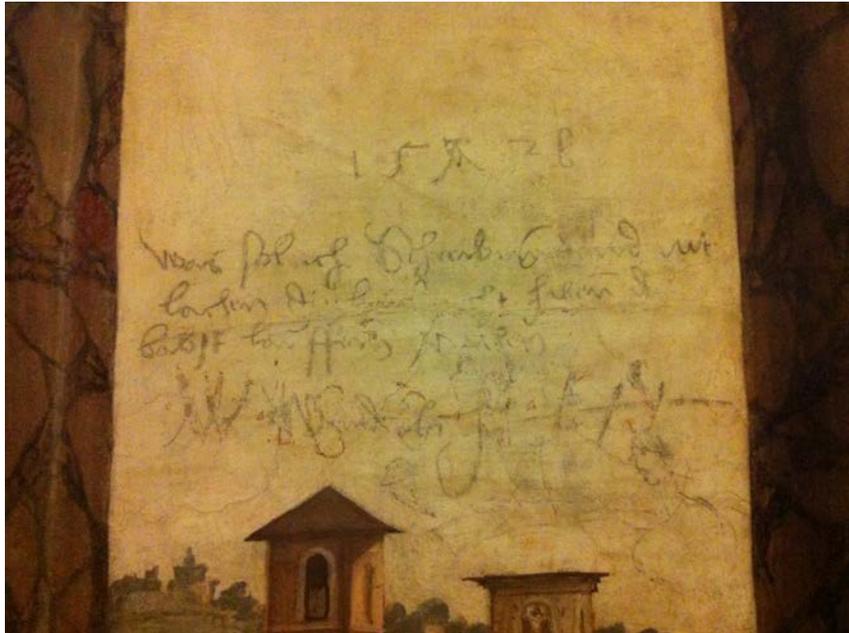

Figure 7 – One of the most famous early-modern graffiti in the city of Rome, these ironic lines by a *landsknecht* placed boldly on top of a landscape painting in the Villa Farnesina comment on the Sacco di Roma in 1527. Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

Less surprising is the fact that graffiti related to sports have not shown up in the Tyrolean material so far. Common in Roman Antiquity (in the context of gladiators and horse races, see e.g. the examples given by Köhne and Ewigleben 2000, 73, figure 62; 138, figure 123; 141, figure 127) and very popular in our own times (especially among European soccer fans), graffiti of the medieval and early modern period do not show any similar hints to opposing parties in such events as tournaments. But it seems that these events were usually part of courtly representations, and in the region discussed here they did not have clear teams or factions, although this might not have been true within Italian city-states (such as Florence, Siena, in the Venetian game of *pallapugno*, or in the Palio della Balestra in Gubbio and Sansepolcro). There is a graffiti dating from 1540 showing a man with a halberd in Hasegg Castle in Hall in Tirol, but since he wears a peculiar garment with bells stitched on it, he might have something to do with the place being used as a mint (Schmitz-Esser 2008). Weapons are sometimes represented (this is the case with a door to a sacristy in Friesach, in Carinthia, today displayed in the entrance room to the Alte Galerie in Eggenberg Castle in Graz, depicting St. Nicolas and showing some finely engraved graffiti crossbows), but it is difficult to interpret the precise meaning of such weapons. The most convincing explanation is that they fit within the inscriptions that name the profession of the writer, often followed by a depiction of their working tools, as in the above-mentioned cases of the butcher's helping hand in Frundsberg Castle and the craftsmen from Hall, giving not only their names, but their professions, too.

What can be learned by the relative absence of sexual and political content and any reflection on major events of the day from the graffiti in the region? First, it seems noteworthy to underline that this stands in stark contrast to other regions in Europe. In the 'palazzi' of Renaissance Italy, historical and political remarks were relatively common. In the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, a series of graffiti starting around 1433 and dating from the century that followed added short historical comments in the style of chroniclers of the day, using the walls with the famous frescoes by Taddeo di Bartoli for their laconic remarks (Miglio 1997). Some researchers have argued in favour of a link between these historic references in the material and the degree of participation in society, i.e. to the civic life of the (Italian) city-state (Miglio and Tedeschi 2012, 614-615). In this light, it is noteworthy that the graffiti so far found in the Tyrol did not include political statements, underlining that regional diversity makes a general evaluation of graffiti more difficult. In the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, for example, the following graffito was found: 'W Isabella bella che una volta è stata cortese con me' (Sarti *et al.* 2017, 72).[11] In this case, the writer must have had either a political or an erotic allusion in mind. In contrast, the graffiti writers from the Tyrol seem not to have been trying to communicate with their readers in order to shape public opinion or memory, or to distribute a subversive message by means of a cheap and highly visible statement on a church or castle wall. To all our knowledge, not even in times of crisis such as during the popular uprisings of 1525 has there been a major use of graffiti for political aims. On the contrary, many graffiti sites in the Tyrol suggest that they were embedded in communication that included the upper or middle classes: the graffiti could serve as a kind of guest book in a castle or as a marker left by a donor in a church. In this sense, they come closer to the observations made for early modern England, where there were even printed advisories for the sentences to adorn interior walls in Halls, Bedrooms and Guest Chambers (Fleming 1997). The secular writers of our graffiti had some education, as such they were part of the establishment and therefore people who wanted no major share in any subversive message. In this regard, the context of the court we find in Italian 'palazzi' like in Urbino or in Siena might be radically different to the situation in the Tyrol, with its many different, rural settings for graffiti writing. The only context in which there seems to have been a major reflection of a socio-political development relates to the confessional disputes of the sixteenth century following the Reformation, already mentioned above. But in the Tyrol, the expression of the new faith had mainly resorted to choosing the clandestine path of allusions, for example by correcting Christian conduct. To be openly critical – as in the case of the *landsknecht* in the Farnesina – might have just been one step too far; and why take such a risk, if you could underline your ideas perfectly well by propagating Christian ideals based on the Bible? In this sense, the often found graffiti with their moralising contents fitted neatly within the broader picture of the reformation in the Tyrol (Andergassen 2017).

It is well known from other examples that graffiti contained references to historical events. Apart from the already mentioned, prominent case of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, we could refer to graffiti such as the one found in a small chapel in San Sebastiano in the Savoy, close to the town of Arborio, where a sixteenth-century writer alluded to the plague affecting Lombardy at the time (Plesch 2010, 141; 2014, 140-142; 2015, 47-48; 2018, 78 'Was sol ich schreibenn und nit lachen, die lanzknecht haben(n) den babst lauffenn machen', see Esch 2004, 109; and Guichard 2014, 41-42, figure 1, transcription slightly corrected). Although such cases are missing in the Tyrol, references to the buildings the graffiti were written on can sometimes be observed:

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[11] 'Long live Isabella the fair, who once was courteous with me'.

one such case are the graffiti on the consecration of the chapel at Berneck Castle already quoted above; another one can be found in the small chapel dedicated to Saint Rochus in Bieberwier. Here, on the back of an altar piece, a graffito gives us the only written evidence of destruction by fire and subsequent reconstruction of the chapel's tower in 1640 (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 307-308, cat. no. 329). It remains difficult to find out why allusions to dramatic social events (such as the unrest in 1525 or the devastating plague in the 1640s that struck the region and is well documented in other – even epigraphic – source material) are absent from the graffiti found so far in the Tyrol. Although graffiti with political content might have been a phenomenon tied to an urban or court environment, the case in San Sebastiano in the vicinity of Arborio shows that, in principle, even in similar rural communities such discussions could be found. It might well be that further research clarifies the picture, but the loss of large part of the graffiti from the often renovated, enlarged and reconstructed court buildings in Innsbruck does not help in the comparison to the Italian graffiti findings. It is important, though, to underline that in contrast to most other graffiti studies, the survey underlying this paper is based on extensive scrutiny of well over a thousand graffiti within a broader region (especially the Inn Valley), and not of single case studies in prominent churches or 'palazzi', so that the absence of certain graffiti types in this mainly rural setting is all the more significant and demands further explanation. We should not forget that we are still in the early stages of serious graffiti research: if the chapel in San Sebastiano, with its many allusions to catastrophes, leads us to think that graffiti might have helped to overcome such trauma (Plesch 2014, 135-140, 142-145; 2015, 56), this cannot be the reason behind contemporary graffiti writers in very similar socio-economic circumstances in the Tyrol, although in some instances even the same context applies. The back of the altarpiece of the chapel in Bieberwier that contains the above-mentioned inscription on the chapel tower is full of graffiti made by church visitors, and since it is dedicated to Saint Rochus, they certainly searched for protections against the plague, as in the case of the chapel in San Sebastiano (Plesch 2014, 134; 2015, 51). Nevertheless, none of them used the same explicit allusion to a concrete outbreak of the plague as their Savoy counterparts did, writing only their names, the date, their profession, and/or moralizing aphorisms (Köfler and Schmitz-Esser 2013, 307-308, cat. no. 329). This might well hint at a different social practice when using sanctuaries for protection in times of plague, although we are unable to glean how far this is the case.

5. *The Devil, the Hangman and the Cross of Jerusalem – Graffiti and Beyond*

The previous sections have shown that most of the graffiti are found in churches, that a great bunch of them seems to relate to pilgrims and benefactors of the churches where they were produced and that the (male) writers belonged to a social class capable of writing and mostly educated in Latin. Many of them only indicated their presence, gave their name (with or without their profession), and the year they visited. Some graffiti hint at the day of the visit, in this case usually a saint's day or a festivity when the church was visited by the author. But why did they inscribe themselves here, in a sacred space that, during mass, was only open to the clergy and where visitors came as close as possible to the relics of the church? This seems to hint at a function of graffiti as communication aimed not just to other visitors, but also to the other world. In fact, this becomes clearer when we look for content that was drawn with apotropaic or malicious intent. This is not very frequent, but can be found amongst the material under scrutiny here.

In a house in Landeck that was formerly used as the residence of the local judge, an inscription in red chalk (?), today covered by new plaster and dating to 1520, read as follows: 'Avertat[ur] retrorsus [et] erubescat q[ui] volu[i]t mihi mala' (Ammann 1978, 222; Köfler and

Schmitz-Esser 2013, 170, cat. no. 164).[12] The apotropaic content is obvious. The interpretation of a small devil's head in the lower part of the fresco in the Church of Our Saviour in Hall in Tirol is more difficult (figure 8). The profile of the devil's head comments on the thematic strand of the fresco above, showing the Last Judgement and a demon pulling on one of the rising dead to take him to Hell. Thus, the graffiti writer might have thought of commenting on or contemplating the fresco's main message. Matthew Champion has included an English example in his recent work on graffiti, too (from Beachemwell, Norfolk, see Champion 2015, plates in between pages 114 and 115, seventh figure), so that we can confidently state that this devil is not unique. However, in the case of the head in Hall, the eye is over-emphasised, making it possible that the graffiti was attacked at its 'weakest' point to restrain the power of the image. Such practice of mutilating the devil's image is well documented in medieval book illuminations (Camille 1998), and it is striking that a painted devil above its graffiti counterpart in the fresco from Hall is not as well preserved as the rest of the painting.

Figure 8 – Amongst the many graffiti in the Church of Our Saviour, Hall in Tirol, Northern Tyrol, one graffiti writer placed a devil's head here, well visible on the left ray of the underlying star. Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

But the most astonishing sequence of graffiti in this context are scratchings showing gallows with two capital letters 'hanging' from the crossbar, dating from the sixteenth century. There can be no doubt that this interpretation as a sketch of gallows is correct, since some of the examples – all either from the fresco in the choir of the Church of Our Saviour in Hall in Tirol or the balustrade of the gallery in the parish church in Hall – even depict the ladder used by the hangman to put criminals on the gallows (Schmitz-Esser 2006a, 117; Schmitz-Esser 2006b, 105; figure 9). The interpretation is open to debate, but to me it seems highly probable that we are dealing with initials (what else could two capital letters indicate, all the more since they

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[12] 'Who wished me evil, shall be turned away and repent'.

are not the same but vary in every graffito: 'BK', 'MG', 'IH', 'WP'). Placing these signifiers of a person in the place of the hanged and using a sacred space for the graffiti would indicate that a curse might be a possible explanation for these graffiti. Or did someone wish for the rescue of a beloved one, condemned to death on the gallows? Hall, after all, had a place of execution and was home to a professional hangman (Moser 1982). A third interpretation could make these drawings a form of prayer for the hanged after their death, helping them in the afterlife and testifying as to the remembrance of the condemned after their execution. It is interesting to think that the gallows in Hall (so far, no other examples of this iconography have been found in the Tyrol) are in all three scenarios, a reflection of the nature of the other graffiti they complemented. All of them tried to connect the writer and his message – mostly in the positive sense of a perpetuation of presence close to the divine – to the other world.

Figure 9 – Several graffiti from Hall in Tirol show the picture of gallows with pending letters (initials?).
This example with ladder can be found in the choir paintings of the Church of Our Saviour.
Photo by Romedio Schmitz-Esser. Courtesy of the Author

The reality, however, is more complex, and this is just one aspect of medieval and early modern graffiti. As shown above, *memoria* and *fama* went hand in hand. And for contemporaries, using the cross of Jerusalem to identify the reason for a pilgrimage, the naming of a donor to the church to perpetuate a good deed or to inscribe oneself in the context of the regional literate elite might not have made such a great difference after all. As Detlev Kraack has shown in his work, noble pilgrims of this age even commissioned professional masons to make their graffiti, which included sophisticated coats of arms (Kraack 1997, 314-315). Adventure and pilgrimage, praying and remembering a visit might often have been one and the same thing. Moreover, contemporaries already had differing views on the practice of graffiti writing, as Felix Fabri's remarks quoted at the beginning of this article underline. But the one thing that can be learned from this is the insight that one explanation for the whole phenomenon of pre-modern graffiti writing will in any

case not be sufficient. In some places, the practice was welcomed, since it was linked to prestige and income; in others, it might have been prohibited and restricted (as in the cases in Palestine mentioned by Felix Fabri). The same is true for the intention behind this act of writing, and once more, this article intended to question the often all too clear-cut line in epigraphy between graffiti and 'proper' inscriptions in the sense of canonical definitions of the field.

Taking a somewhat contrary position to the comment by Felix Fabri at the end of the fifteenth century, in this article I have argued that graffiti writing in late medieval and early modern Tyrol was not simply an act of vandalism, nor was it perceived as such by most contemporaries. The graffiti may well have been part of a social practice that enabled rural churches to pay for construction and maintenance work, to pay for the clergy in the region or to form a social bond within male groups, be it by the act of inscribing a group of pilgrims on their crossing of the Alps, thereby perpetuating their prayers for a safe passage, or by reuniting a local elite in prestigious places such as a castle hall or a special church. As so often in the pre-modern European world, mundane and religious thought intertwined, and although it is worthwhile reflecting on the practices and meanings of graffiti in the Tyrol, one of the most challenging aspects of the epigraphic field work is that we only gradually arrive at a better understanding of them. Further research needs to be carried out and, as the Tyrolese case has shown, in order to be efficient it must include a broad regional survey.

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