

The Khnum Temple graffiti project at Elephantine, Egypt:

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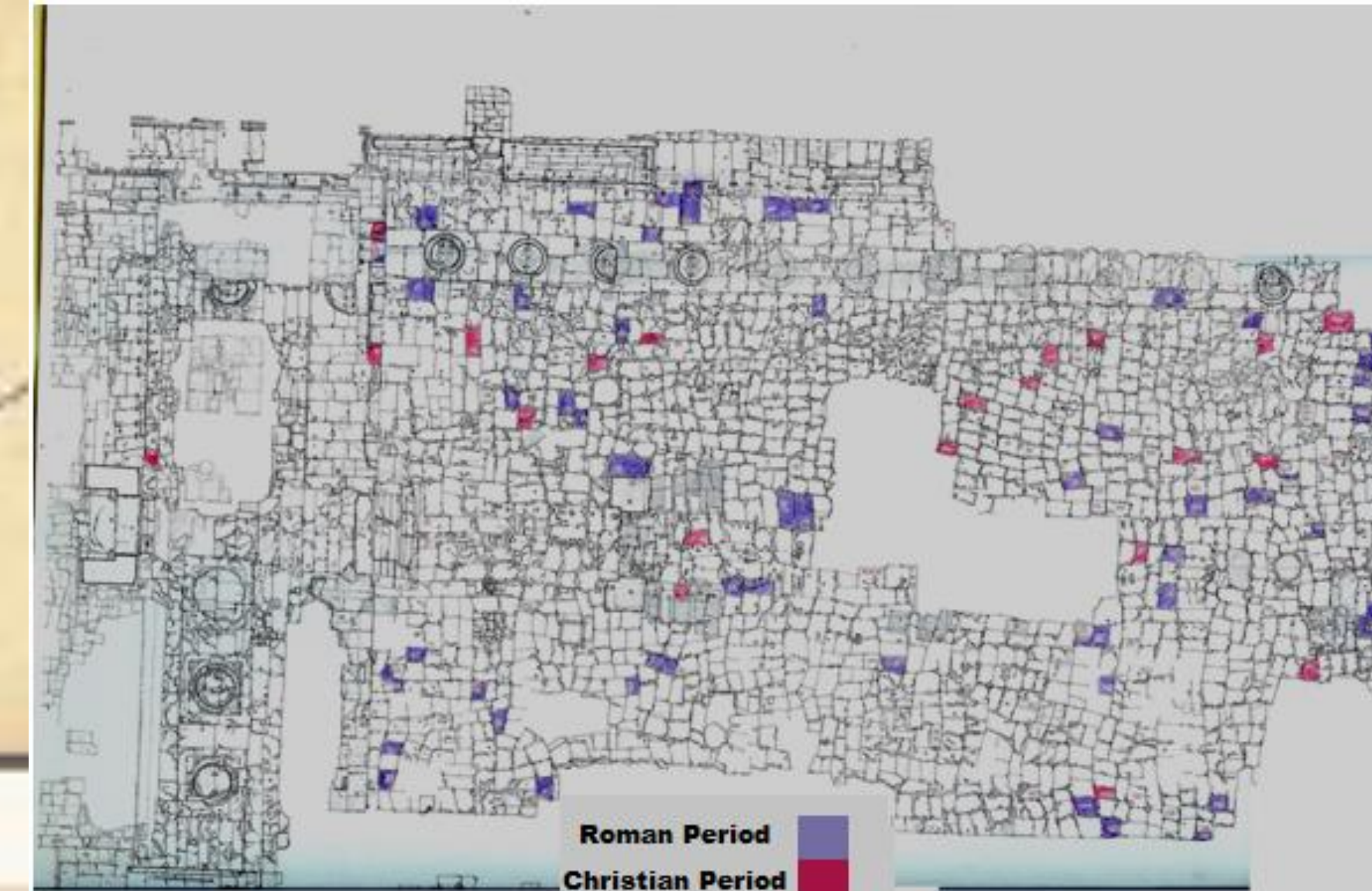
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Introduction:

The temple of Khnum at Elephantine was one of the most significant temple complexes in pharaonic Egypt. Its lasting legacy is reflected in the monumental forecourt and terraces that were built in front of it in the Roman period. One of the most prominent features of the complex are the graffiti that are found abundantly on the forecourt. This project attempts to uncover and analyze the meaning of these graffiti, many of which were incised for religious reasons. As a result, they provide us with a vivid representation of the personal religious piety of ordinary Egyptians in this period. Despite their significance, they remain hardly studied, and each publication, therefore, already provides a contribution to scholarship. The graffiti that were collected from ongoing excavations by the Swiss Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Research on Ancient Egypt and the German Archaeological Institute, were thoroughly described and interpreted, sorted into categories and then located on a map of the site to determine their exact location on the pavement of the forecourt and their relation to each other. Thus, the project has painted an evocative image of the sacred and secular life of Egyptians and their intimate relationship with this temple.

Methodology:

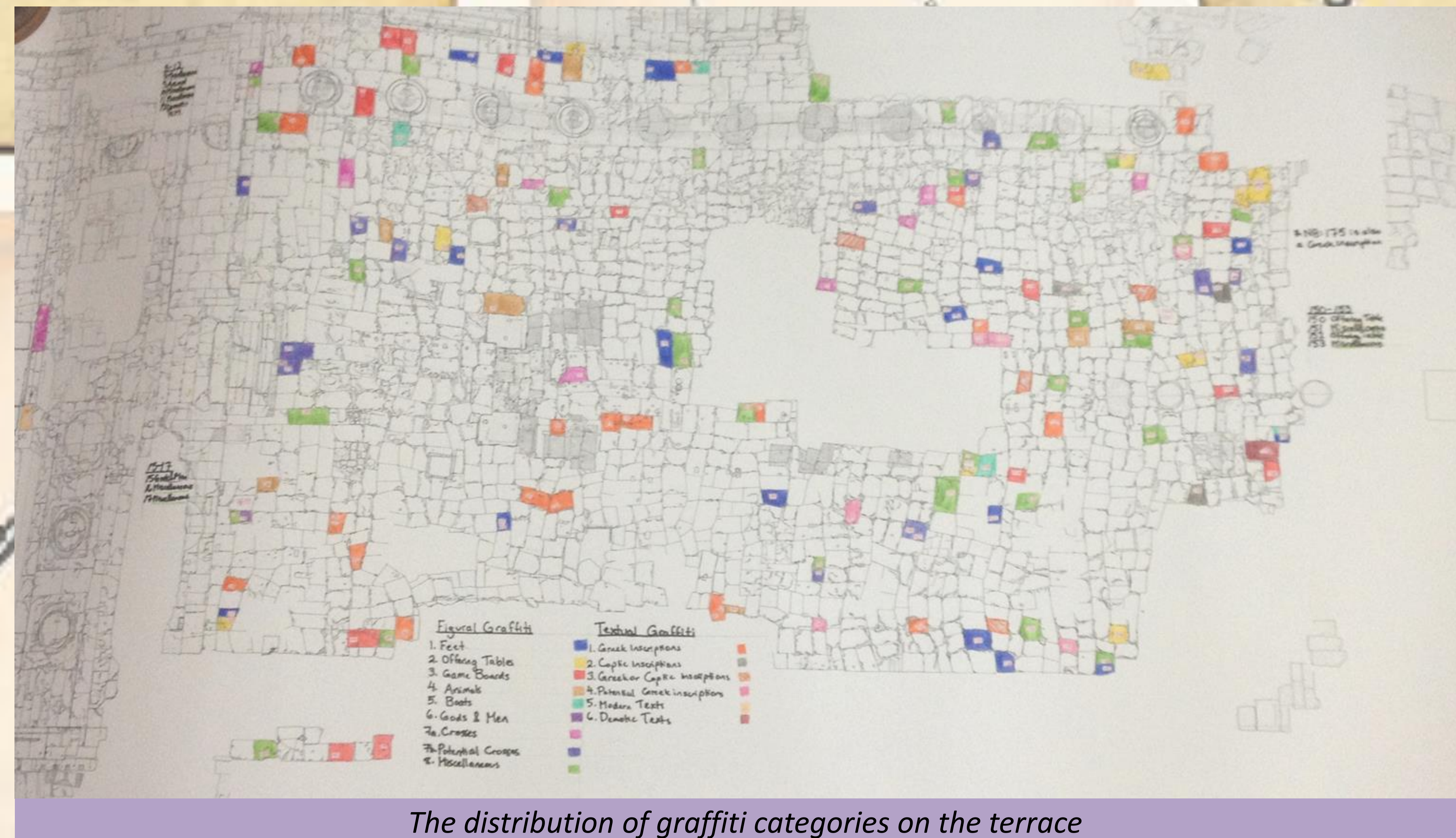
All the graffiti were analyzed and then assigned to a specific category. As can be seen on the map of the terrace below, each graffiti's location was marked on the terrace with a colour corresponding to the category. In this way, any clusters of graffiti from the same category were revealed. Finally, on a separate map, the graffiti were marked again, but this time the colours corresponded to the period to which each symbol was dated, Roman or Christian.



The dispersion of Roman and Christian graffiti

Results:

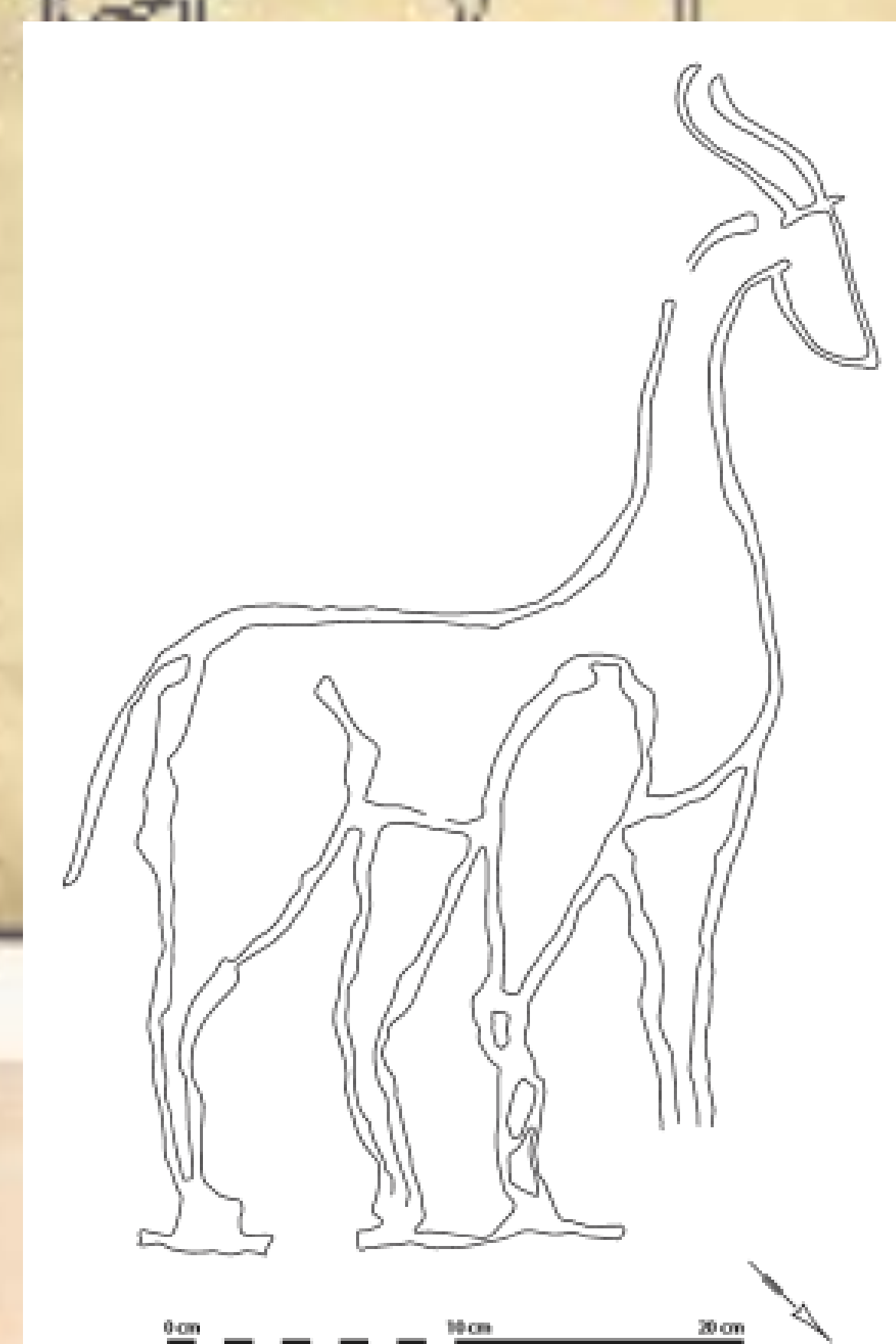
A thorough analysis and investigation of the graffiti supplies fascinating information about the lives of ordinary Egyptians during the two different eras covered by the graffiti. They also most avidly display the precipitous changes during the transition of the Roman period to Christianity. As a rule, Greek inscriptions are associated with Egypt under Roman rule, while Coptic indicates a Christian date. Outlines of feet and offering tables were left by worshippers during the Roman period as a form of devotion and a personal signature to mark their pilgrimage. Evidently, crosses were left by Christians. The prevalence of certain symbols and texts reflects the changing belief systems of ordinary Egyptians and their relationship with the Khnum temple. For example, beautifully crafted images of a ram and gazelle represent the sacred animals of the main deities of the island, Khnum and Satet, while one of the Greek inscriptions includes a presently-unknown local name of 'Osiris'. On the other hand, we find Coptic inscriptions and typically Christian names, such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It should be noted that although the temple terrain was in principle sacred, mundane symbols are also found. Many examples of game boards were recorded under the originally shaded parts of the north colonnade proving that the temple also had secular purposes for people to meet and pass the time. Moreover, there are four Greek inscriptions consisting of the word 'τόπος', meaning 'place (of)' followed by a name. These were interpreted as markers for merchants who had booths at the temple to sell their goods.



The distribution of graffiti categories on the terrace



The remains of the Khnum Temple in Egypt



Drawing of a gazelle, the Sacred animal of Satet, Roman era



ὡ τόπος <Σ>ερήνου
"The place of Serenos"
A Greek Inscription from the forecourt, Roman era



Νιλάμμων
A pair of feet with a palm branch in between with a Greek inscription beneath it; the name "Nilammon" is a common name from the 2nd Century AD onwards, Roman era

Conclusions:

The project gives a lively picture of the use and reuse of the forecourt of Khnum temple in the Roman and Christian periods on the basis of a largely unexplored source, graffiti. Together, they yield detailed snapshots of personal religious piety at the southern Egyptian frontier in the Roman period and illustrate the religious transformation that the country underwent in Christian times. Thus, a completely new body of evidence has been made available to the scholarly community, and indicate the need for more such future studies.

References:

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All images including background courtesy of Dr. Jitse H F Dijkstra.

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