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Antoaneta Granberg (Gothenburg, Sweden)

AN UNDECIPHERED SCRIPT IN A CHRISTIAN SPACE: THE RUNE-LIKE GRAFFITI OF MURFATLAR AND THE TRANSITION FROM PAGAN TO CHRISTIAN LITERACY

The main part of the textual graffiti found in the churches, crypts and galleries, carved in the medieval rock-cut complex in Murfatlar (Constanţa region, Romania) is dated to the 9th–11th century[1]. The number of identified, documented, published, and analyzed textual and pictorial graffiti from Murfatlar has increased with each new investigation. Today we have knowledge of circa 200 textual graffiti[2]. Just over a third of the graffiti are in Greek and Old Church Slavonic. Cyrillic has been used for almost all Old Church Slavonic graffiti, Glagolitic appears twice[3].

[1] This article was written as part of the research project "Documentation of the rock-cut monastery at the village of Murfatlar, Constanţa region, Republic of Romania", 2022–2026, carried out in collaboration between the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (NAIM-BAS), and the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanţa (MINAC), Romania. The project was funded by NAIM-BAS, and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, within the framework of the National Scientific Program "Development and Promotion of Bulgarian Studies Abroad". For a detailed account of the entire complex and the existing churches, crypts and galleries, see Komatarova-Balinova, Miltenov, Granberg (2023), and Komatarova-Balinova, Kamburov, Stoilova (2024). The medieval rock-cut complex in Murfatlar is, in order to save space, and avoid repetition, further just called Murfatlar. I would like to thank my colleagues Evgenia Komatarova-Balinova and Pantelis Charalampakis for reading an earlier draft of this article and for providing valuable comments and suggestions.

[2] The site was discovered in the late 1950s. The main publications that specifically concern the graffiti are: Bogdan 1960; Барня 1962 and Barnea 1962; Комша 1964; Михаиле 1964; Mihăilă 1964; Diaconu, Petre 1969; Barnea, Ştefănescu 1971; Beševliev 1977; Tryjarski 1981 and 1985; Трыярский 1983; Popkonstantinov 1986; Popkonstantinov 1987; Popkonstantinov, Kronsteiner 1994: 61–102; Попконстантинов 2001; Damian, Samson, Vasile 2009; Komatarova-Balinova, Miltenov, Granberg 2023; Charalampakis 2024, and Granberg 2024. The term graffiti is used here as a practical umbrella term for incised textual and pictorial marks. It does not imply that all examples are informal or casually executed. At least a few examples in church B4 are not scratched rune-like graffiti, but carefully planned and competently executed inscriptions. However, they are included within the broader graffiti corpus because they form part of the same spatial, visual, and material environment of incised writing.

[3] The beginning of a Latin abecedary was recently discovered by Pantelis Charalampakis (Charalampakis 2026).

The biggest group by far though, almost 60% of all now known graffiti in Murfatlar, has been produced in a non-deciphered writing system[4]. Some of the characters in this writing system, preliminarily referred to as rune-like, can be found both in textual graffiti and as single characters. These single rune-like characters, scratched on walls and dispersed throughout the entire rock-cut complex, have so far not been the object of a specialized study. Rune-like graffiti and single characters are also to be found elsewhere on the Balkans, for example in Pliska and Preslav.[5] The quantity of rune-like graffiti from Murfatlar is, however, unparalleled. And some of the rune-like characters are only to be found in Murfatlar (Stănciulescu-Bîrda 1986: 238, 250; cf. Granberg 2005: 131–132).

1. INTRODUCTION: READING THE UNREADABLE? AN UNDECIPHERED SCRIPT AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

The rune-like graffiti at Murfatlar cannot yet be read with any degree of certainty, and the nature and status of the graphic system remain unresolved. Although several attempts at decipherment have been made, none has gained general acceptance[6]. This does not mean, however, that the material is historically mute. The graffiti can be examined as situated, shaped, and relational written objects. Murfatlar offers a methodologically important case for investigating writing beyond decipherment, specifically because their linguistic content remains inaccessible.

This article discusses how an undeciphered graphic system can be analyzed as writing practice, and how such a system becomes historically interpretable in a Christian ritual space through its placement, visual relations, and graphic conventions. The study is therefore both empirical and theoretical. It is grounded in measurable and visually documentable observations, but it uses these observations to develop a broader model for the transformation of writing during Christianization. Rather than treating the Christianization of writing simply as the replacement of one alphabet by another, the article examines how older or alternative graphic competencies could be relocated, re-coded, and reused within Christian semiotic

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[4] There are also approximately 10% fragmentary graffiti that contain letters that could belong to more than one alphabet. These are categorized as uncertain.

[5] A comprehensive study of single rune-like signs from medieval Bulgaria was carried out by Ljudmila Doncheva-Petkova (1980). This study resulted in a systematization of the signs according to their form, and provided a solid basis for the identification of invariants and attested variants of the signs (Дончева-Петкова 1980).

[6] Several attempts to read the graffiti with Germanic, e.g., Gothic, and Turkic, e.g., Hunno-Bulgarian languages have been made; see Tryjarski 1985, who reads the graffiti from right to left, and Stănciulescu-Bîrda 1986: 238; cf. Georgiev 1995, Георгиев 1997 and 2005, who suggests a connection to the letters of the Greek alphabet. All methods proposed so far for interpreting the characters and reading the graffiti have one thing in common: they assume that several different characters have the same sound value and that one and the same character could express different sounds, sometimes even different sounds in one and the same word. This is an important reason why none of the proposed readings of the graffiti has been commonly accepted.

environments. The argument is organized around three analytical levels for studying graffiti as writing practice (Figure 1). First, spatial evidence situates the graffiti within the church space, with attention to architectural setting, liturgical zones, visibility, access, and placement. The guiding question at this level is: Where are the graffiti located in the church space? Second, relational evidence examines the position of graffiti in relation to surrounding visual and material elements, including images, crosses, figures, other textual graffiti, frames, surfaces, and visual fields. The guiding question is: What are the graffiti placed next to, within, above, or below? Third, graphic evidence concerns the internal organization of textual graffiti: sign forms, sign sequence, segmentation, layout, punctuation, framing, repetition, and emphasis. The guiding question is: How are the graffiti graphically formed, segmented, and marked?

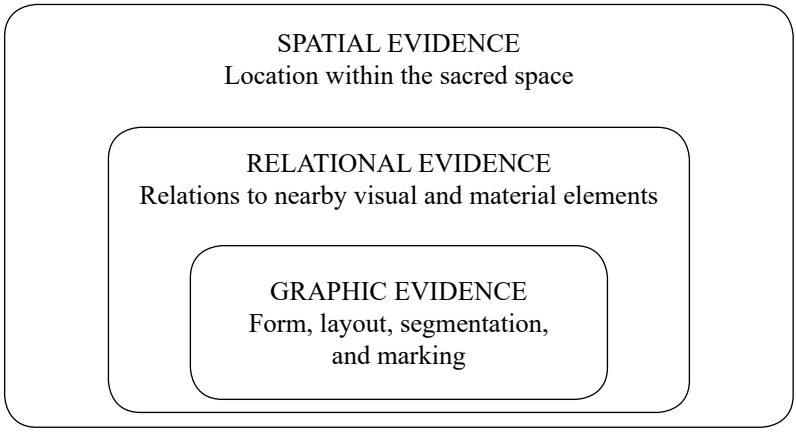


Figure 1. From space to sign: three levels of evidence in the analysis of graffiti as writing practice

This is not primarily a study of all formal properties of the rune-like graffiti, nor it is an attempt at decipherment. It concerns the conditions of legibility without reading: the ways in which writing may operate visually, ritually, and socially, even when its linguistic content cannot be recovered. The relevant evidence therefore consists of spatial placement, relations to other graffiti and visual motifs, graphic design, layout, segmentation, and cases of overlap, avoidance, or damage. Against this background, the central question of the article may be formulated as follows: How can the rune-like graffiti of Murfatlar be interpreted as evidence for the Christianization of writing practices when their linguistic content remains undeciphered? More specifically, what do their spatial distribution, graphic layout, and immediate visual context reveal about their role within a Christian written and visual environment? I argue that the rune-like graffiti at Murfatlar cannot be classified solely on the basis on language, script, or deciphered content. Their placement in church space, their interaction with crosses, saints, pictorial graffiti, and Greek,

Cyrillic, and Glagolitic graffiti, and their use of shared graphic conventions such as dots, titlo, superscript signs, and invocational crosses, indicate that they participated in a Christianized graphic environment. This participation does not require us to assume that the graphic system was Christian in origin, or that all agents who used it understood it in the same way. It shows, rather, that the transition from pre-Christian or non-Christian to Christian writing practices involved change on several analytical levels: language, script, paleographic form, layout, content, spatial context, use, and material support. These levels need not have changed synchronically or in the same direction.

The transition from pagan to Christian literacy should therefore be understood not only as the adoption of new alphabets and Christian textual genres, but also as the *recontextualization* of older or alternative graphic practices within Christian ritual space[7]. In this framework, scripts are not treated as intrinsically pagan or Christian. Their religious and social meaning emerges through origin, content, use, placement, visual association, and participation in shared graphic conventions. For this investigation, church B4 is selected as the main case study and treated as a micro-laboratory of script contact and Christianized graffiti practice. Church B4 is particularly suitable for this purpose, as it preserves Greek, Glagolitic, Cyrillic, and rune-like graffiti; many graffiti are concentrated around the pillars between the narthex and the nave. And the material allows analysis of height, visibility, relation to the altar, imitation, *damnatio*, and graphic interaction.

The following sections first clarify the documentation and terminology used in the study and then define the analytical units and coding principles applied to the corpus. The analysis then proceeds through the three levels outlined above: spatial distribution, relational context, and graphic evidence. This structure makes it possible to ask what the rune-like graffiti can tell us about Christianized writing practices even before, or even without decipherment.

2. DOCUMENTATION AND TERMINOLOGY

2.1. Documentation

The present study is based on a combination of *in situ* examination, and photographic documentation, both produced within the framework of the project[8]. Fieldwork was conducted during five campaigns between 2022 and 2026, during which all graffiti included in the corpus were examined *de visu*. The documen-

[7] It should be emphasized from the outset that rune-like graffiti and single signs occur not only in the sacred spaces of the Murfatlar complex, but also in the quarry. However, the present article does not treat the rune-like material from the entire complex as a homogeneous corpus, but focuses on the graffiti documented in church B4 and on their spatial, relational, and graphic integration into a Christian environment.

[8] All documentation used in this article was produced within the framework of the current project, see footnote 1. I am grateful to my colleagues for allowing me to use this documentation in the study on which the present article is based.

tation aimed to record not only the graffiti themselves but also their spatial and visual context. For each graffito, the exact location within the architectural space was documented, together with measurements of the graffiti, individual characters and signs, distance from the floor, facing direction, and relation to surrounding surfaces. Particular attention was paid to the immediate context of each graffito, including neighbouring textual and pictorial graffiti, crosses, architectural features, and cases of overlap or possible palimpsest-like reuse of the surface.

In addition to direct observation, the graffiti were studied through an integrated documentation strategy combining high-resolution photography, Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), SLAM LiDAR scanning, 3D mapping, and photogrammetry. This approach was designed to visualize the almost completely preserved architectural volumes of structures arranged in superposition. Laser scanning made it possible to construct three-dimensional models and selected architectural sections, providing views of the structural parts into which graffiti have been incised. RTI was used for the detailed examination of shallow, damaged, and overlapping incisions, since it allows individual signs to be enlarged, and the same surface to be illuminated from multiple virtual light directions. This made it possible to identify subtle details of sign forms, carving techniques, and superimposed lines that are otherwise difficult to observe (Komatarova-Balinova, Miltenov, Granberg 2023: 165–166; Granberg 2024: 42; Komatarova-Balinova, Kamburov, Stoilova 2024: 8–11).

A central objective of the documentation was to establish the relationships between individual incisions. Particular attention was therefore paid to determining, which lines were carved earlier or later, whether different graffiti touched or avoided one another, and whether traces of recutting, erasure, or palimpsest-like reuse of the surface could be observed. Equally important was the documentation of entire surfaces rather than isolated textual graffiti. Each graffito was recorded together with its surrounding textual and pictorial graffiti, its relation to architectural features, and its position within the vertical space of the church. This contextual approach provides the basis for the spatial and relational analyses undertaken in the following chapters. All visible signs and letter forms were reproduced manually *in situ*, on the basis of direct observation, assisted by magnification when necessary. The drawings sought to record the graffiti as accurately as possible, including partially preserved signs, uncertain traces, and damaged sections. This procedure made it possible to distinguish between clearly identifiable characters, and fragmentary or ambiguous traces, while simultaneously allowing preliminary readings and alternative interpretations to be tested directly during fieldwork. The combination of spatial recording, photographic documentation, RTI analysis, and manual reproduction forms the methodological basis for the spatial, relational, and graphic analyses presented in this article.

The Murfatlar material comprises both textual and pictorial graffiti. The textual material includes isolated letters and texts. In many cases, linguistic identification is possible only when a graffito contains one or more complete words. Often

isolated letters, abbreviated forms, and fragmentary graffiti cannot be assigned securely to a specific language or script. This circumstance makes formal, spatial, and contextual analysis particularly important. Rather than relying exclusively on deciphered textual content, the present study investigates **graffiti as material and visual manifestations of writing practice**. The present analysis must also take into account that church B4 has undergone reconstruction. Not everything, especially fragmented parts on the pillars, seems to be in its original position, which affects both documentation and interpretation. Spatial observations relating to these fragments, especially height, facing direction, proximity, and relation to neighbouring graffiti, should therefore be treated with caution unless the original position of the fragment can be established.

2.2. Terminology

A terminological reservation is necessary concerning the designation of the largest group of graffiti discussed in this article. The term *rune-like* is employed here as a pragmatic descriptive label and should not be understood as implying that the graffiti are written in a historically attested runic script, whether Germanic, Turkic, or otherwise. At present, no generally accepted term exists for the writing system represented by these inscriptions. The reason is straightforward: none of the hypotheses proposed so far concerning the language, content, or nature of the graffiti has achieved scholarly consensus, although some interpretations have gained more support than others[9]. The terminology used in previous scholarship reflects differing assumptions about the character of the writing system itself.

A considerable number of scholars have referred to the graffiti as *runes*, often without discussing which specific features of the Murfatlar characters would justify such a classification (Барня 1962; Комша 1964; Diaconu, Petre 1969; Beševliev 1977; Theodorescu 1974: 89; Москов 1983; Tryjarski 1985; Stănciulescu-Bîrda 1986: 238; Смядовски 1993: 35–36; Georgiev 1995; Атанасов 2010). However, the use of the term *runes* is problematic. The structure of the sign inventory and the formal characteristics of the characters indicate that the Murfatlar graffiti do not represent a variant of any historically attested runic script[10].

Individual signs have occasionally been compared with characters known from various runiform traditions of Eurasia, but no convincing relationship has been demonstrated with regard to either the structural principles or the phonetic values of established runic writing systems. Consequently, terms such as *rune-like* (*rune-nartige*, *runiforme*, *рунообразни*, *руноподобни*) are methodologically preferable at present, since the nature of the writing system remains unresolved (Malingoudis 1979: 107; Дончева-Петкова 1980; Попконстантинов 2001; Georgiev 2004).

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[9] See footnote 6.

[10] The epigraphic material from Murfatlar is therefore not included in the corpus of the East European runic inscriptions (Мудрак 2017).

The designation *rune-like* should therefore be understood as a purely descriptive term referring to the visual appearance of the signs rather than to any established linguistic, cultural, or genealogical relationship with known runic traditions.

3. DEFINING CHRISTIAN LITERACY: FROM SCRIPT TO PRACTICE

The theoretical premise of this study is that language, script or alphabet, content, layout, space, and material support constitute separate analytical levels. They may overlap, but they should not be treated as identical! A text may be Christian in content without being written in an alphabet of Christian origin; a script may have been developed within a Christian milieu but later used for non-liturgical purposes; and a graffito, whose linguistic content remains undeciphered, may nevertheless participate in a Christian written environment through its placement, layout, and visual relations (Granberg 2008: 11–21). For the purposes of the present article, I distinguish between three ways of defining writing as Christian.

First, writing may be Christian **by origin**. In this sense, the Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets may be regarded as Christian alphabets because they did not exist before the Christianization of the Slavs, and because their emergence is closely connected with translation, liturgy, and Old Church Slavonic written culture. This does not mean that every later use of these alphabets was necessarily liturgical or ecclesiastical. It means, rather, that their historical formation is inseparable from the Christianization of language and writing. Second, writing may be Christian **by content**. This category includes prayers, biblical quotations, invocations, names with a clear Christian function, *christograms*, *staurograms*, and other textual forms whose semantic content or conventional use identifies them as Christian. Third, writing may be Christian **by context of use**. This category is particularly important for the present study. It includes writing placed in church spaces, in proximity to altars, crosses, images of saints, graves or crypts, and routes of liturgical movement. In such cases, the religious meaning of writing is not determined only by language or deciphered content, but also by its spatial and visual integration into a Christian environment. This category is the key to the analysis of the rune-like graffiti at Murfatlar. Since their linguistic content has not been securely deciphered, they cannot be classified primarily through language or text. They can, however, be analyzed as part of Christian writing practice when they appear in church space, interact with crosses or other Christian visual signs, or share graphic conventions with Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic graffiti. This approach makes it possible to treat undeciphered writing not as mute evidence, but as a historically interpretable form of graphic action.

This also requires a distinction between **exposure to writing** and **the practice of writing**. Exposure to writing includes seeing letters and texts on physical surfaces, reading texts, hearing texts read or sung aloud, and encountering representations of writing in visual culture, such as books, scrolls, inscriptions, or text-bearing objects. The practice of writing, by contrast, refers to concrete acts of graphic

production: the making of individual letters, names, words, phrases, or longer texts on a material surface. In the case of graffiti, the preserved trace is both the result of a writing act and a record of the agent's engagement with a particular surface, space, and visual field. The Christianization of literacy should therefore not be understood only as the replacement of one script by another or as the introduction of Christian textual genres. It also involved new needs for written production, new conditions for training and transmitting graphic competence, new forms of exposure to writing, and new spaces in which writing could be seen, imitated, copied, and performed. Church services required books; translations and redactions generated new written forms; funerary and devotional practices produced inscriptions; and the church space itself exposed different groups of people to letters, texts, crosses, icons, and liturgical objects. These processes did not necessarily affect all social groups, languages, scripts, and media at the same time or in the same way.

In this sense, the transition from non-Christian to Christian literacy must be analyzed across several distinct but interacting fields: language, script or alphabet, paleographic form, layout, content, spatial context, function, and material support. A language such as Greek could be used both before and after Christianization, whereas Old Church Slavonic belongs to Christian written culture from its beginning. Similarly, Glagolitic and Cyrillic may be treated as Christian by origin, while Greek and the rune-like graphic system cannot be defined in such a way, since they belong to broader and more complex histories of use. The rune-like graffiti are therefore especially significant: if the same or related graphic practices appear both outside and inside Christian contexts, they provide evidence not of simple replacement, but of transfer, adaptation, and recontextualization. Miklas' discussion of the development of the Cyrillic Old Church Slavonic writing system is important for the historical framework of the present study (Miklas 1988). He emphasizes that the official introduction of Glagolitic in the Old Bulgarian state did not simply replace earlier graphic practices, but led to a complex situation in which Latin, Greek, Glagolitic, Cyrillic, "Proto-Bulgarian runes", and other scripts present on Bulgarian territory were functionally redistributed or displaced. He also describes the competition between Glagolitic and Cyrillic as taking place on at least local and functional levels, with a formal level also likely (Miklas 1988: 58). This is directly relevant to the Murfatlar material, since it supports a model of Christianization as coexistence, competition, functional differentiation, and recontextualization rather than as the simple replacement of one script by another. Popkonstantinov's recent discussion of medieval Bulgarian literacy and epigraphy underlines the connection between the rune-like inscriptions and broader questions of graphic and linguistic development in medieval Bulgarian written culture (Попконстантинов 2023). This supports the view that the rune-like material should be considered within the wider framework of script contact, graphic repertoire, and the Christianization of literacy.

With due caution, I propose to describe this line of inquiry as a **sociography of graffiti**, or **graffiti sociography**. The term is not yet established, and it should be

used here as a methodological proposal rather than as a fixed category. By "graffiti sociography" I understand an adaptation of manuscript sociography to epigraphic and graffiti material: the study of graffiti as socially situated written artefacts, produced by agents with varying degrees of graphic competence, placed on specific surfaces, oriented toward human and/or divine audiences, and interacting with other texts, images, signs, and sacred objects in the same space. The value of such an approach lies in its ability to move beyond the question of decipherment alone. It allows us to ask who could have produced or encountered writing, what kind of graphic competence is implied, how writing was positioned in relation to other visual and material elements, and how different scripts and graphic conventions coexisted within one sacred environment. For Murfatlar, this is essential, because the rune-like graffiti can be interpreted only if their spatial, relational, and graphic properties are treated as evidence in their own right.

3.1. Corpus and Method for Spatial, Relational, and Graphic Coding: What Exactly Is Counted?

In order to make the analysis reproducible, it is necessary to define what is counted and how the material is coded. The present study distinguishes between three analytical units: the **item**, the **cluster**, and the **complex**. An **item** is an individual graffito, delimited by hand, line ductus, and spacing. This is the basic unit of documentation and coding. An item may consist of a single sign/letter or a text. A **cluster** consists of several graffiti within the same visual field. This may include graffiti on the same side of a pillar, on the same wall surface, or within a limited area of approximately 20–50 cm. The cluster is important because graffiti often acquire meaning through proximity, avoidance, overlap, or interaction with neighbouring signs, images, and inscriptions. A **complex** is a larger spatial and visual context, such as the pillars between the narthex and the nave, the area near the altar, the surface surrounding a cross, or a zone associated with a pictorial graffito or a saintly figure. The complex makes it possible to analyze how individual graffiti participate in broader patterns of spatial use. Each textual graffito is coded according to a set of variables designed to capture spatial, relational, and graphic evidence. The aim is not to replace decipherment, but to show how conclusions may be drawn even when the linguistic content of the graffiti remains inaccessible.

Miklas' graphematic approach is also methodologically relevant (Miklas 1988). He distinguishes between grapheme language and phoneme language and defines the grapheme as an abstract unit of form and function, not merely as a dependent representation of phonemes. He further stresses that, especially for older writing traditions, palaeographic clarification is an indispensable precondition for graphematic analysis, since written signs exist through the relation between form and function (Miklas 1988: 53–54). This supports the approach taken here: the rune-like graffiti cannot yet be securely read, but their forms, variants, layout, and graphic organization can still be analyzed as evidence of writing practice.

Variable	Recorded values
1. Script or graphic system	Rune-like, uncertain
2. Type	Isolated letter/sign, textual graffiti
*3. Length	Number of signs, number of lines, degree of fragmentation
4. Spaces of the church	Entrance, narthex, nave, templon, altar
5. Surface type and facing direction	Wall, pillar; west-facing, east-facing, south-facing, north-facing
6. Height	Distance from the floor; possible standing, seated, or kneeling position
7. Proximity	Cross, saintly image, other pictorial graffiti
*8. Layout	Number of lines, inclination, character height, planning, use of available surface
9. Graphic markers	Dot, colon, titlo, superscript sign
*10. Relation to other graffiti	Beside, within, above, below; avoiding, overlapping, damaging
*11. Relative chronology	Earlier or later than neighbouring graffiti, where this can be established
*12. Hand and competence	Secure, uncertain, imitative, irregular, trained, untrained

Table 1. Documentation and coding scheme for rune-like graffiti

An asterisk has been added in front of some of the variables, namely "length", "layout", "relation to other graffiti", "relative chronology", and "hand and competence". These variables will not be analyzed within the scope of the present article (except for "layout" that has been partially analyzed); their analysis remains to be carried out in a later stage of the project. Nevertheless, they are included here in order to present the overall methodological framework and to show which variables form part of the complete documentation and coding scheme.

In addition to these variables, each observation is assigned a degree of certainty. Readings and classifications are marked as **secure**, **probable**, **possible**, or **uncertain**. This is particularly important for fragmentary graffiti, isolated signs, and cases where a character could belong to more than one alphabet or graphic system. The distinction between secure and uncertain evidence is essential because the argument of this article depends not on speculative readings, but on observable spatial, relational, and graphic features. The coding scheme is deliberately explicit because the rune-like graffiti cannot yet be analyzed through ordinary textual interpretation. Their significance must therefore be reconstructed through features that can be documented independently of decipherment: where they are placed, what

they are placed near, how they interact with other graffiti and images, how they are segmented, and which graphic conventions they share with other writing systems in the same space.

This method does not assume that spatial or graphic evidence can reveal the linguistic content of the graffiti. It assumes instead that writing practice leaves traces beyond language. Even when a text cannot be read, its placement, form, relation to other marks, and participation in shared conventions can show how writing functioned within a Christian visual and ritual environment.

4. SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION

This section examines the spatial distribution of the rune-like graffiti in church B4 through three variables defined in the coding scheme: spaces of the church (no. 4), surface and facing direction (no. 5), and height (no. 6). The main questions addressed here are where the rune-like graffiti are placed within the church space, are they placed on walls or pillars, and at what height they were scratched. These variables make it possible to discuss the relation of the graffiti to the entrance, the narthex, the nave, the templon area, the altar, the pillars, and the viewer's bodily position within the church. In terms of graffiti sociography, these variables make it possible to move from the graffito as an isolated text to the graffito as a socially situated act of writing: produced on a particular surface, at a particular height, and within a particular zone of access, visibility, and ritual orientation[11].

A distribution map of the known textual graffiti in church B4, including Greek, Cyrillic, Glagolitic, and rune-like, has been published elsewhere (Гранберг 2025: 79–80). That material provides a basis for comparing the spatial specifics of the rune-like graffiti with that of the other script groups attested in the same church space. However, the present analysis focuses on the spatial distribution of the rune-like graffiti in church B4. At the same time, it lays the methodological foundation for a more comprehensive comparative investigation of spatial evidence of all preserved graffiti in the church, including those written in Greek and Slavonic. By defining and testing variables such as church zone, surface, facing direction of the surface, and height above the floor, this study establishes a framework that can later be applied systematically to the entire epigraphic corpus of church B4. Such a comparative approach will make it possible to determine whether the rune-like graffiti follow the same spatial logic as the Greek and Slavonic graffiti, or whether they represent a distinct mode of writing practice within the same sacred space.

The quantitative observations presented below should be treated with caution. The figures are rounded, and minor adjustments may be necessary as the classification of the material proceeds. Their purpose is therefore not to establish absolute numerical precision, but to identify the main spatial tendencies in the material.

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[11] For a detailed account on the structure and the building faces of church B4, together with very informative visualizations, see Komatarova-Balinova, Kamburov, Stoilova (2024: 16, 30–32).

What matters here is the broader pattern: where rune-like graffiti tend to occur, which surfaces they occupy, and how their placement differs from, or overlaps with, the distribution of other script groups. The currently documented corpus of rune-like graffiti in church B4 consists of 53 items. Their distribution across the church space shows that they are not confined to one restricted zone. Approximately 6% are to be found in the entrance area, 36% in the narthex, and 45% in the nave (Figure 2). No rune-like graffiti have been documented inside the altar area itself, but approximately 9% are located by the templon, in direct connection with the altar zone. This distribution suggests that rune-like writing was present in several parts of the church, including transitional and highly visible zones, while still respecting the boundary of the altar area.

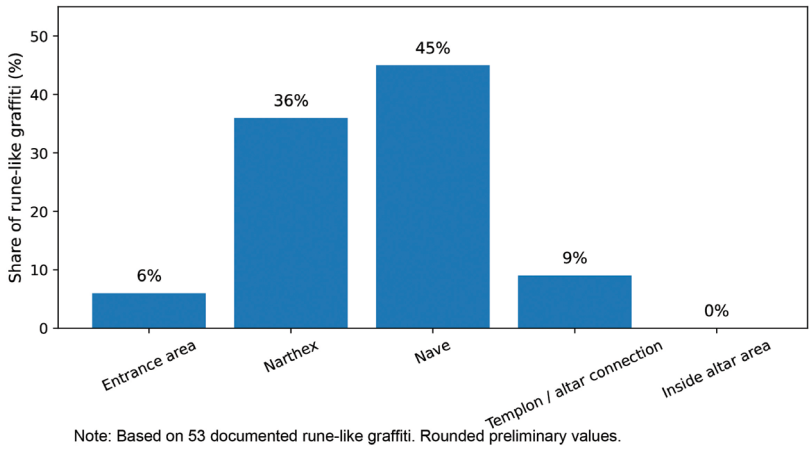


Figure 2. Distribution of rune-like graffiti by church zone

The narthex is particularly important in this respect. In early and medieval Christian ritual practice, the narthex could function as a liminal zone between the outside world and the fully sacralized space of the nave. It was also a space where catechumens and other persons with restricted liturgical participation could be present during parts of the service. For this reason, the presence of rune-like graffiti in the narthex may be relevant for understanding access, participation, and the social range of those who produced or encountered writing in church B4.

The distinction between wall surfaces and pillar surfaces is also significant. In the church, approximately 62% of the rune-like graffiti occur on pillars, while 38% occur on walls (Figure 3). This general tendency becomes more pronounced when the narthex is considered separately: in the narthex, approximately 95% of the rune-like graffiti occur on pillars and only 5% on walls. In the nave, by contrast, the distribution is more balanced, with approximately half of the rune-like graffiti to be found on pillars and half on walls. In the templon area, the distribution is likewise divided equally between pillars and walls: half of the graffiti occur on the

two pillars framing the Sanctuary Door (also known as Beautiful Door), while the other half occur on the southern side of the templon wall, to the right of the southern Angel, that is the southern deacon's door.

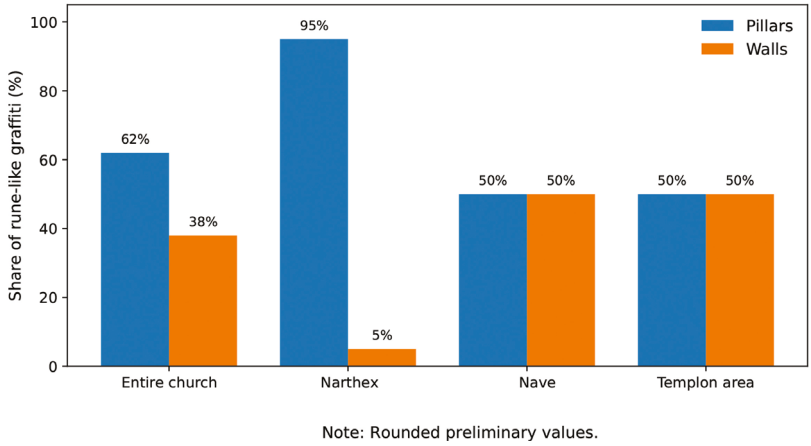


Figure 3. Rune-like graffiti on pillars and walls

The facing direction of the inscribed surfaces further refines this picture. Across the church, approximately 44% of the rune-like graffiti occur on surfaces facing west, including west-facing pillar faces, and the western wall, 21% on north-facing surfaces or on the northern wall, 8% on east-facing surfaces, and 28% on south-facing surfaces or on the southern wall (Figure 4). The low proportion of graffiti on east-facing pillar surfaces is particularly noteworthy. One possible explanation is bodily and ritual: scratching on an east-facing pillar surface would often require the person to turn their back toward the altar, which may have been avoided or considered inappropriate. It should however also be considered that the value of the text might be higher if it faced the altar.

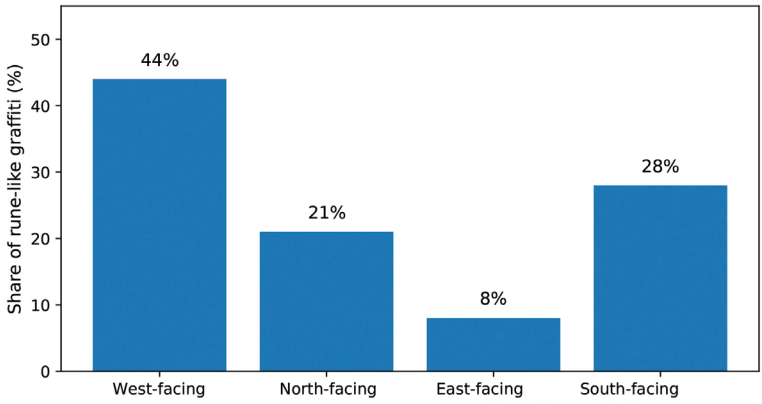


Figure 4. Facing direction of inscribed surfaces bearing rune-like graffiti

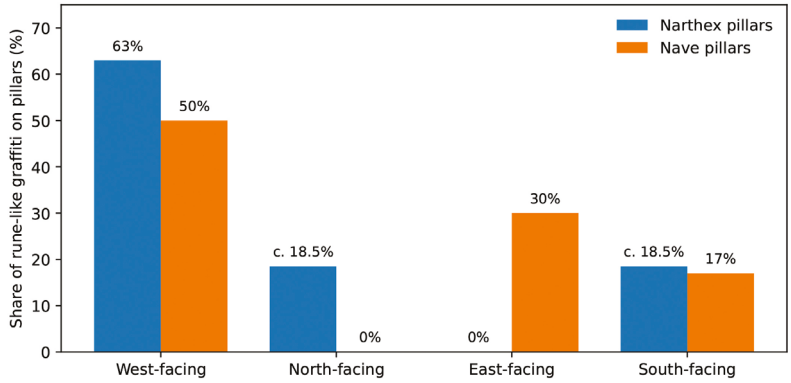
The same tendency can be observed more clearly in the rune-like graffiti distribution on pillars (Figure 5). On the narthex pillars, approximately 63% of the rune-like graffiti occur on west-facing surfaces, while the northern and southern sides contain roughly comparable numbers. The eastern faces of the narthex pillars are here counted as belonging to the nave, since a person scratching on these surfaces would have had to stand physically in the nave. On the nave pillars, no rune-like graffiti have so far been documented on north-facing surfaces. Approximately 30% occur on east-facing surfaces, all of them on the pillars separating the narthex from the nave; 50% occur on west-facing surfaces; and 17% occur on south-facing surfaces. Although the numbers must be interpreted cautiously, the overall pattern suggests a preference for visually accessible and ritually less problematic surfaces, especially west-facing pillar surfaces[12].

Height is especially important because it introduces the body of the scribe and viewer into the analysis. The rune-like graffiti have a mean height of approximately 158 cm above the floor. By comparison, the mean height of the Glagolitic graffiti is approximately 144 cm, that of the Greek graffiti approximately 142 cm, and that of the Cyrillic graffiti approximately 141 cm (Figure 6). The rune-like graffiti therefore occupy a somewhat higher average position than the other script groups.

This difference should not be overinterpreted, since the figures are rounded and the corpus remains under continued examination. Nevertheless, the pattern is analytically relevant. A higher mean position may indicate that many rune-like graffiti were carved at a relatively comfortable standing height and in positions where they were easily visible. By contrast, lower graffiti may reflect different bodily postures, different agents, later use of remaining surfaces, or the occupation of less privileged parts of the wall or pillar surface. The height data should therefore be interpreted together with surface and spatial location. A graffito placed at standing height on a west-facing pillar between the narthex and the nave has a different visual and social position from one carved low on a wall, close to the floor, or on an already crowded surface. Height may indicate not only the physical posture of the writer, but also the visibility of the graffito, its intended or possible audience, and its relationship to other marks on the same surface.

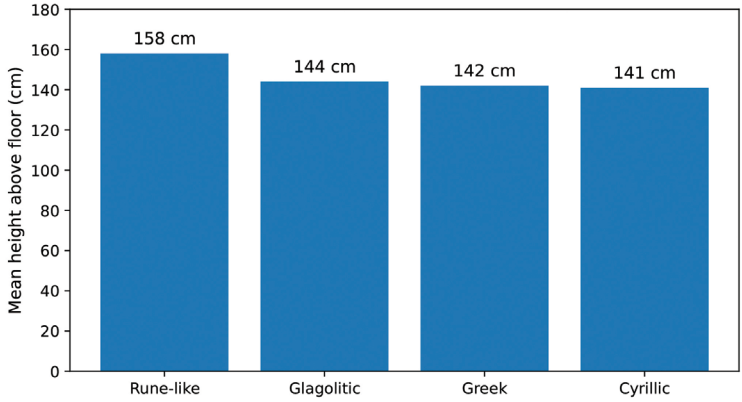
Taken together, the spatial data suggest that the rune-like graffiti in church B4 were neither marginal nor randomly distributed. They occur in the entrance area, the narthex, the nave, and the templon area, but not inside the altar area itself. They are particularly associated with pillars, especially in the narthex, and they show a marked preference for west-facing surfaces (Figures 2–5). Their average height is higher than that of the other script groups. These features point to a writing practice that was spatially integrated into the church, visually accessible, and conditioned

[12] All these results must be interpreted with great caution, since the surfaces on which the graffiti are located were affected by building activities during the different construction phases of the church (Komatarova-Balinova, Kamburov, Stoilova 2024: 6–35).



Note: Rounded preliminary values. For narthex pillars, the remaining 37% after west-facing surfaces is shown as approximately equal north- and south-facing shares. East-facing narthex pillar surfaces are counted as nave, since the writer would have stood physically in the nave.

Figure 5. Rune-like graffiti on narthex and nave pillars by facing direction



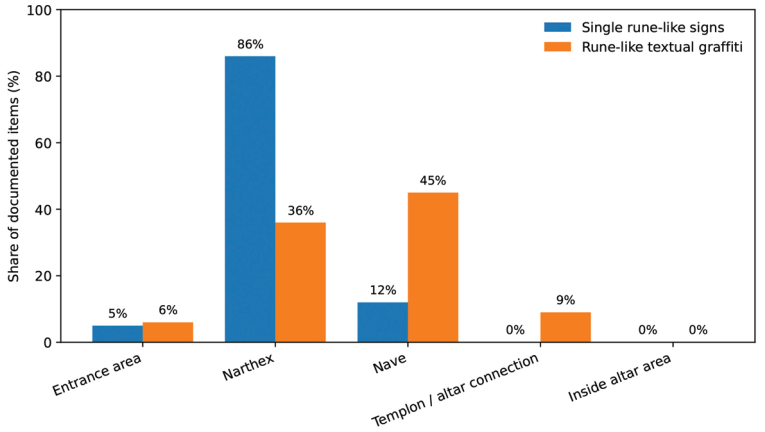
Note: Rounded preliminary values; figures should be interpreted as broad tendencies.

Figure 6. Mean height of graffiti by script group

by both architectural structure and ritual orientation. The spatial distribution of the rune-like graffiti should therefore not be reduced to a single explanation. Their placement may point simultaneously to several processes: an earlier layer of writing, a different group of agents, a broader range of access, or a function distinct from that of the Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic graffiti. At this stage of the analysis, the aim is not to decide between these explanations prematurely, but to identify which patterns can be supported by the documented distribution.

The approximately eighty single rune-like signs documented in church B4 show a spatial distribution that differs markedly from that of the rune-like textual graffiti (Figure 7). The single signs are overwhelmingly concentrated in the narthex: approximately 86% occur there, with 5% located in the entrance area,

and 12% in the nave. No single rune-like signs have so far been documented in the templon or altar-connection zone or inside the altar area itself (Figure 7). These figures are rounded and preliminary; they should therefore be interpreted as indicating a broad spatial tendency rather than an exact final distribution. The contrast with the rune-like textual graffiti is significant. The textual graffiti are more widely distributed across the church space, with approximately 6% in the entrance area, 36% in the narthex, 45% in the nave, and 9% in the templon. The single rune-like signs are by contrast almost entirely concentrated in the narthex and they are much less strongly represented in the nave than the rune-like textual graffiti. This suggests that isolated rune-like signs and rune-like textual graffiti should not automatically be treated as evidence of the same type of writing practice.



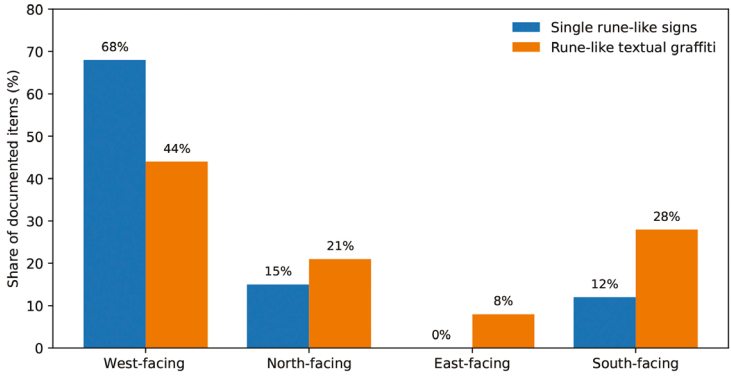
Note: Rounded preliminary values. Single rune-like signs number c. 80 items; rune-like textual graffiti number 53 items. Percentages for single signs do not sum exactly to 100% because the values are rounded.

Figure 7. Distribution of single rune-like signs and rune-like textual graffiti by church zone

The concentration of single signs in the narthex may indicate a more restricted or more socially diffuse form of graphic activity. Single signs may represent marking, testing, practice, presence, ownership, counting, imitation, or abbreviated graphic action, rather than extended inscriptional writing. Their strong association with the narthex is especially meaningful since the narthex functioned as a liminal zone between the entrance and the fully sacralized space of the nave (Figure 7). It was a space of access, transition, and partial participation, and may therefore have been particularly suitable for less formalized or more exploratory graphic practices. The rune-like textual graffiti, by contrast, extend more clearly into the nave and into the templon or altar-connection zone. This broader distribution suggests a more developed form of writing practice, involving sequence, layout, facing direction, and a more deliberate engagement with sacred space. The distinction between single signs and textual graffiti is therefore not merely formal, but also spatial and potentially social. This distinction is central to a sociography of graffiti,

since it suggests that different graphic forms may correspond to different modes of participation, different degrees of graphic competence, and different forms of access to the sacred space. In church B4, isolated rune-like sign-making appears to be concentrated primarily in the transitional space of the narthex, whereas rune-like textual graffiti is to be found in almost all parts of the church interior.

The distribution of the single rune-like signs according to facing direction confirms that they follow a more restricted spatial logic than the rune-like textual graffiti (Figure 8). In the church, approximately 68% of the single rune-like signs occur on west-facing surfaces or on the western wall, while 15% occur on north-facing surfaces, 12% on south-facing surfaces, and none on east-facing surfaces (Figure 8). These figures are rounded and preliminary, but the general tendency is clear: single rune-like signs are strongly associated with west-facing surfaces and are absent from east-facing ones.



Note: Rounded preliminary values. Single rune-like signs number c. 80 items; rune-like textual graffiti number 53 items. Percentages for single signs do not sum to 100%, because values are rounded.

Figure 8. Distribution by facing direction in church B4: single rune-like signs and textual graffiti

This pattern differs from that of the rune-like textual graffiti. Among the textual graffiti, approximately 44% occur on west-facing surfaces or on the western wall, 21% on north-facing surfaces, 8% on east-facing surfaces, and 28% on south-facing surfaces. The textual graffiti therefore show a broader distribution across various facing directions, including a limited but significant presence on east-facing surfaces. The single signs, by contrast, are much more concentrated on west-facing surfaces and show no documented east-facing examples. The absence of single rune-like signs on east-facing surfaces is analytically important. As noted above, carving on east-facing pillar surfaces may have required the writer to turn away from the altar, depending on the exact position of the surface. If this interpretation is correct, the distribution of single signs may reflect a stronger dependence on bodily orientation and immediate accessibility. West-facing surfaces were easier to

encounter and use from the westward side of the church space, especially in or near the narthex, where the single signs are also most heavily concentrated.

The comparison suggests that isolated rune-like sign-making was more spatially constrained than rune-like textual graffiti. Single signs appear primarily on surfaces that were readily accessible, visually exposed, and ritually less problematic. Textual graffiti, by contrast, were distributed more widely and could be placed on a greater variety of surfaces. This strengthens the distinction between single signs and textual graffiti: the former may represent brief, abbreviated, experimental, or socially diffuse acts of marking, while the latter reflect a more developed writing practice capable of engaging more flexibly with the spatial organization of the church.

The distinction between pillars and walls confirms that single rune-like signs and rune-like textual graffiti broadly follow similar but not identical spatial patterns. In the church, approximately 66% of the single rune-like signs occur on pillars, while 34% occur on walls. The corresponding figures for the rune-like textual graffiti are very close: approximately 62% occur on pillars and 38% on walls. Both categories therefore show a clear preference for pillars over wall surfaces. This similarity is important because it suggests that pillars were not only preferred surfaces for extended rune-like graffiti, but also for isolated sign-making. Pillars offered accessible, visible, and spatially prominent surfaces, especially in the transitional zone between the narthex and the nave. They were also surfaces encountered physically and visually by persons moving through the church. The concentration of both single signs and textual graffiti on pillars therefore points to the importance of architectural supports as active surfaces of writing practice, rather than as neutral background. At the same time, the close correspondence between the two categories should not obscure the differences observed in church-zone distribution and facing direction. Single rune-like signs are much more strongly concentrated in the narthex and on west-facing surfaces, whereas rune-like textual graffiti are more widely distributed across the nave and the templon or altar-connection zone and occur on a broader range of facing directions[13]. The pillar/wall distribution therefore shows a shared preference for architectural supports, while the zone and facing direction data show different degrees of spatial reach and ritual integration.

The comparison suggests that single rune-like signs and rune-like textual graffiti belonged to the same broader graphic environment, but not necessarily to the same mode of writing practice. Both made use of pillars as privileged surfaces, yet the single signs appear more restricted to accessible and transitional contexts, while textual graffiti are to be found in almost all parts of the church interior. In other words, the difference between isolated sign-making and textual graffiti lies not primarily in the choice between pillar and wall, but in how far each category extends across the sacred space, and how flexibly it engages with different facing directions, and liturgical zones.

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[13] Note that the west-facing surfaces are those turned toward the natural light, whose only source is the entrance of church B4.

A further clarification concerns two spaces in church B4 that are not analyzed separately in the present article. First, the church contains a crypt. Second, the reconstruction of the building history of the church has made it possible to identify a distinct area in the eastern part of the nave, here referred to as the pre-altar space (предолтарно пространство; see Figure 2). This space is not treated as a separate analytical category in the present study. The reason for this limitation is methodological. Before the relationship between the rune-like graffiti and these two spaces can be assessed, the distribution and spatial behaviour of the other graffiti in church B4 must also be analyzed in relation to the crypt and the pre-altar space. Such an investigation would require a broader comparative study of all script groups and pictorial graffiti in the church. In particular, the pre-altar space and its place in the building history of church B4 need to be examined in relation to the graffiti corpus as a whole. This lies beyond the scope of the present article, but it represents an important direction for future research.

5. RELATIONAL CONTEXT

This section examines the relational context of the rune-like graffiti: their proximity to crosses, saintly figures, other kinds of pictorial graffiti, and other visually significant elements in the church space. The analysis therefore concerns not only where the graffiti are located, but also what they are placed next to, within, above, below, or in visual interaction with. A single graffito may be situated in proximity to more than one pictorial or textual element, and this must be kept in mind when interpreting the figures presented below. The numbers do not represent mutually exclusive categories but overlapping relational contexts (Figure 9). The values should be understood primarily as indicators of a broader pattern, since individual figures may change as the analysis and classification of the material continue.

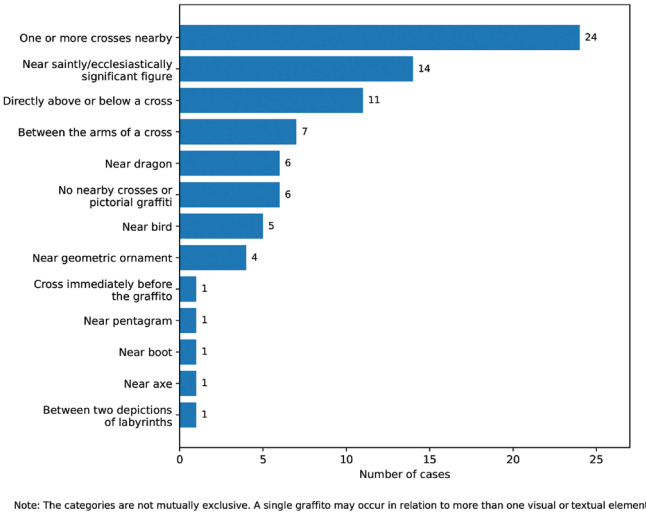


Figure 9. Relational contexts of rune-like graffiti in church B4

The most significant relational category concerns rune-like graffiti placed in or near crosses (Figures 10, 11a, 11b, and 12). This is especially important because a graffito located within the frame of a cross is not merely present in a Christian space; it is visually integrated into a Christian symbolic structure. In the documented material, seven rune-like graffiti are placed between the arms of crosses. In one additional case, a cross is placed immediately before the beginning of the graffito, where it may have had an invocational function. In eleven cases, rune-like graffiti are positioned directly above or below a cross. It is rarely possible to determine with certainty whether the cross and the graffito were made by the same hand or at the same time. Even when this cannot be established, however, the proximity itself remains significant: the cross and the graffito share the same visual field and may have been perceived together. In a further twenty-four cases, one or more crosses occur near the graffiti, although not in their immediate surroundings.

A second important relational category is proximity to saintly or ecclesiastically significant figures (Figures 11a and 11b)[14]. In fourteen cases, rune-like graffiti are placed in the immediate vicinity of a saintly figure, or of a figure whose iconography suggests a connection with Christian ritual or ecclesiastical activity. The graffiti occur above the head, above the shoulders or arms, below the arms, and, in one case, on the lower part of the figure's clothing. Such placements are significant because they insert the rune-like graffiti into a visual field already structured by Christian figural imagery. Even when the content of the graffiti cannot be read, their placement in relation to saintly bodies, gestures, and clothing creates a Christian visual context for their interpretation.

Rune-like graffiti also occur in close relation to other kinds of pictorial graffiti and non-textual motifs (Figure 9). In six cases, they are found in the immediate vicinity of a dragon (Figure 12); in one of these cases, the graffito is placed between the dragon's ears. In four cases, the graffiti are located near geometric ornaments (Figure 12). In five cases, they occur in the immediate vicinity of a bird, and in one of these the graffito is placed inside the image of the bird (Komatarova-Balinova, Miltenov, Granberg 2023: 169–199)[15]. One graffito is placed near a pentagram (Figure 12), one near a boot, one near an axe, and one between two depictions of labyrinths. These examples show that the rune-like graffiti participated not only in a textual environment, but also in a broader graphic field in which writing, images, symbols, ornaments, and possibly apotropaic or mnemonic signs coexisted.

The relations between textual and pictorial graffiti are not always destructive or competitive. In most cases, text and image coexist on the same surface without overlapping or damaging each other's lines. This may suggest that later writers or

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[14] For a detailed analysis of anthropomorphic pictorial graffiti, together with illustrations, see Komatarova-Balinova, Miltenov, Granberg (2023: 166–169, 192, 197).

[15] In the cited publication, photographs and drawings of the relevant graffiti, both pictorial and textual, are presented together with an analysis of which were made earlier and which were made later.

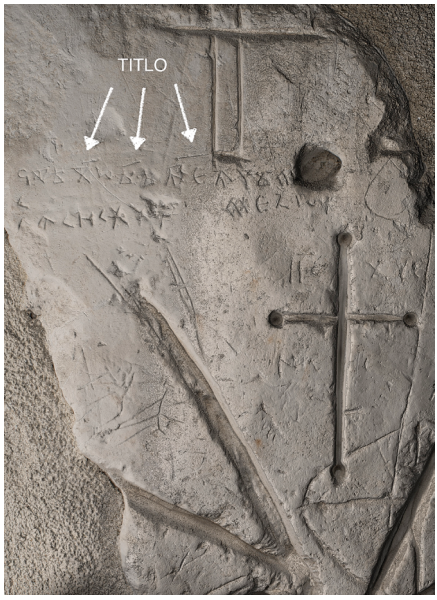


Figure 10. Rune-like graffiti on the west side of a pillar in the nave in church B4. Photo: E. Komatarova-Balinova, additions by A. Granberg



Figures 11a and 11b (detail). Rune-like graffiti on the north wall in the nave in church B4. Photo: E. Komatarova-Balinova, additions by A. Granberg

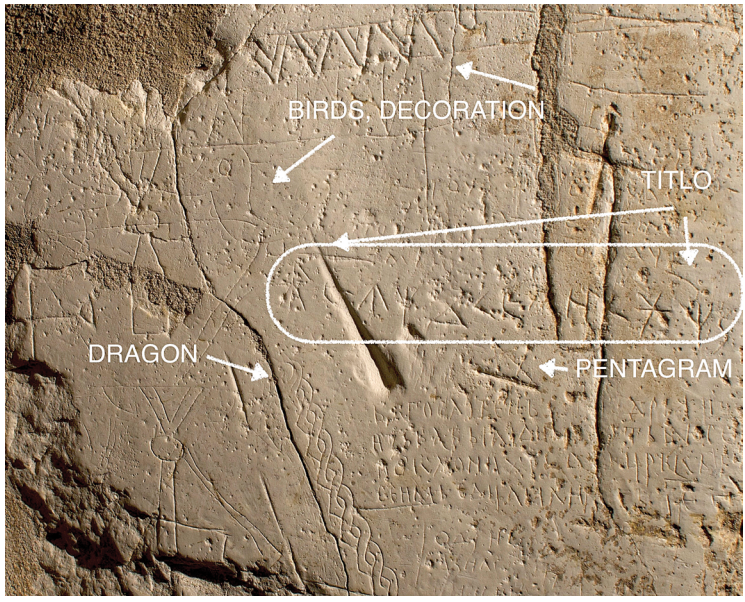


Figure 12. Rune-like graffiti on the north side of a pillar in the narthex in church B4. Photo: P. Charalampakis, additions by A. Granberg

image-makers perceived earlier graffiti as meaningful graphic objects rather than as visual noise on the wall. Avoidance, spacing, and the careful use of remaining surface can therefore be treated as relational evidence. The preservation of neighbouring marks may indicate recognition, respect, or at least an awareness of earlier graphic acts. For a sociography of graffiti, such cases are especially important because they show that the wall surface functioned as a social field of writing, in which later agents responded to, avoided, preserved, or reorganized earlier graphic acts. There are, however, two important exceptions. In one case, a cross partly damages a rune-like graffito; in another, the image of a bird partly damages the graffito. These cases are significant because they show that interaction between graffiti could also involve superimposition, partial destruction, and the reorganization of the graphic field. Such examples may provide evidence of relative chronology, changing use of the surface, or different attitudes toward earlier graffiti. They should not automatically be interpreted as deliberate erasure, but neither should the damage be treated as insignificant.

Only six rune-like graffiti occur without any crosses or pictorial graffiti nearby. The overwhelming majority of the material is relationally embedded in a visual environment containing Christian symbols, figural imagery, pictorial graffiti, or other graphic elements. This observation is central to the argument of the article. The rune-like graffiti are not isolated marks placed randomly on empty surfaces. They form part of a dense visual and material field, in which crosses, saints, images, ornaments, graffiti, and architectural surfaces interact.

The theoretical implication is that Christianization is not only a matter of textual content. It also concerns the ways in which graphic objects are placed within a space where crosses, altars, saintly images, liturgical movement, and earlier graffiti already produce meaning. For the rune-like graffiti at Murfatlar, relational evidence is therefore crucial. Even without decipherment, their proximity to crosses, saintly figures, pictorial graffiti, and other marked surfaces allow them to be analyzed as participants in a Christianized visual and writing environment.

6. SHARED GRAPHIC CONVENTIONS ACROSS SCRIPTS: LAYOUT WITHOUT DECIPHERMENT

This section examines graphic conventions shared across the rune-like, Cyrillic, Greek, and, to a lesser extent, Glagolitic graffiti in Murfatlar. The purpose is not to establish direct influence from one script to another, nor to argue that formal resemblance necessarily implies genetic relationship. Rather, the aim is to show that the rune-like graffiti participated in the same graphic environment as the Greek and Slavonic graffiti. Even when their linguistic content remains undeciphered, their layout, segmentation, marking, and sign forms can be analyzed as evidence of writing practice. Miklas' classification of formal graphic classes in Cyrillic Old Church Slavonic writing provides useful comparative terminology for the analysis of shared graphic conventions (Miklas 1988). He discusses supralinear signs, including titlo, as well as linear signs such as punctuation marks, including dots and

multi-dots punctuation (Miklas 1988: 60). He also treats suprascription, special ligatures, line structure, line beginning and ending, and text block organization as meaningful graphic phenomena (Miklas 1988: 63–65). These categories are relevant for the rune-like graffiti at Murfatlar because several of the same types of visual organization as titlo, dots, superscript signs, segmentation, and linear arrangement are attested in the rune-like material. They therefore strengthen the argument that the rune-like graffiti participated in a broader Christian graphic repertoire, even if their linguistic content remains undeciphered.

Graphic feature in rune-like graffiti	**Number of attestations**
Sign forms also attested in Greek, Cyrillic, and/or Glagolitic	25
Superscript signs	8
Colon or vertical three-dot punctuation	2
Middle dot	4
Titlo, especially straight titlo without "ears"	6
Lining above and below the textual graffiti	1
Special segmentation by vertical lines	1

Table 2. Graphic features and layout conventions attested in the rune-like graffiti

Several graphic features in the rune-like graffiti correspond to conventions also known from Greek and Slavonic written culture, as shown in Table 2. Superscript signs are attested in eight rune-like graffiti. Punctuation-like colon marks, that consist of three vertically arranged dots, occur twice. A middle dot occurs four times. A titlo, especially the straight form without "ears", occurs six times (Figures 10 and 12). In one graffito, the text is placed between two horizontal lines, one above and one below the graffito, creating a lined writing field. A special form of segmentation is also attested in one rune-like graffito. These features are significant since they concern the organization of writing rather than the phonetic or linguistic value of individual signs. Superscript signs, points, colon-like punctuation, titlo, lining, and segmentation are all devices that structure written material visually. They mark boundaries, organize the written field, emphasize particular elements, or connect the graffito to conventions familiar from manuscript and epigraphic writing. Their presence in the rune-like graffiti suggests that they were not produced outside the graphic norms of the Christian written environment in which Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic graffiti also occurred.

Formal correspondences between individual rune-like signs and letters in Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic further support this observation. In total, twenty-five signs attested in the rune-like graffiti also occur, in similar or identical form, in one or more of these three alphabets (Granberg 2008: 20–22)[16]. This does not

[16] It is understandable that no complete paleographic analysis of the rune-like inscriptions and single characters so far has been made, considering the magnitude of the material and the difficulties regarding documentation, identification, and reproduction of the graffiti inscriptions. Tables and lists

mean that the rune-like system derives from Greek, Cyrillic, or Glagolitic, nor does it prove that the corresponding signs had the same sound values. It shows, to put it more cautiously, that the rune-like signs existed within a broader repertoire of graphic forms shared across several writing systems used in the same cultural and religious environment.

The direction of influence between the rune-like material and the Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic material cannot always be established. This is especially important for the relation between the rune-like signs and the early Slavonic alphabets. Similarity may reflect borrowing, adaptation, convergence, imitation, shared training, or the circulation of graphic habits across different writing systems. For this reason, the evidence should be understood as pointing to ***a shared graphic repertoire*** rather than to a unidirectional influence. From the perspective of graffiti sociography, such shared conventions are evidence of the circulation of graphic habits across different scripts, agents, and levels of competence within the same sacred environment. The relevance of these observations lies in the possibility of analyzing layout without decipherment. The rune-like graffiti cannot yet be read securely, but they can be studied as visually structured written artefacts. Their use of superscript signs, punctuation-like marks, titlo, segmentation, linear organization, and formally comparable sign shapes shows that they participated in a Christianized graphic environment. In this sense, graphic evidence supports the broader argument of this article: writing may be historically interpretable not only through language and content, but also through layout, visual organization, and participation in shared conventions of inscription.

7. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: CHRISTIANIZATION AS THE RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF WRITING

The rune-like graffiti of Murfatlar show that the Christianization of literacy was not merely the introduction of new scripts, new languages, and new textual genres. It also involved the incorporation, relocation, and re-coding of existing or alternative graphic practices within Christian spaces. The material from church B4 demonstrates that writing may become part of a Christian environment not only through alphabet, language, or deciphered content, but also through placement, visual association, layout, and participation in shared graphic conventions. This article has argued that the rune-like graffiti cannot be classified solely through language or deciphered meaning. Their linguistic content remains inaccessible, and the nature of the graphic system is still unresolved. Yet the material is not historically mute. The graffiti are placed, shaped, and relational written objects. Their location within the church, their proximity to crosses, saintly figures, pictorial graffiti, and textual graffiti, and their use of graphic features such as titlo, dots, superscript signs, seg-

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of both invariants and variants of some characters in the rune-like graffiti in Murfatlar has been published by Bogdan 1960: 37–40; Beševliev 1977: 53–56; Дончева-Петкова 1980; Tryjarski 1985: 80; Stănciulescu-Bîrda 1986: 249–251; Венелинова 2003: 239–240; Granberg 2005: 135–139.

mentation, and formal correspondences with Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic letters show that they participated in a Christianized graphic environment.

The first conclusion is therefore methodological. Undeciphered writing can be studied as historical evidence when analysis is shifted from reading to writing practice. Spatial distribution, relation to other visual elements, facing direction, height, layout, and graphic marking all produce evidence that is independent of linguistic decipherment. This does not replace decipherment, nor does it claim to recover the semantic content of the graffiti. It shows, rather, that writing leaves traces beyond language. Even when the text cannot be read, its position, form, and interaction with other marks can reveal how it functioned within a particular visual, ritual, and social environment.

The second conclusion concerns the definition of Christian writing. An alphabet is not in itself always pagan or Christian. Glagolitic and Cyrillic may be treated as Christian by origin, since their emergence is inseparable from translation, liturgy, and Old Church Slavonic written culture. Greek and the rune-like graphic system require a different model, since they could move across religious, linguistic, and social contexts. Writing may therefore be Christian by origin, by content, or by context of use. The rune-like graffiti are especially important since they cannot presently be classified by content. Their Christian relevance emerges instead through spatial and relational evidence: they occur in church space, in relation to crosses and images, and within a graphic environment shared with Greek and Slavonic graffiti.

The third conclusion is that the Christianization of writing was a spatial process. Writing became Christianized not only when new alphabets were adopted or Christian texts were produced and transmitted, but also when graphic practices entered sacred space, were placed near altars, crosses, and saintly figures, respected or interacted with earlier graffiti, and followed visual conventions associated with Christian written culture. The Murfatlar material shows that Christianization should be understood as a process of recontextualization: older, alternative, or parallel graphic habits could be absorbed into a Christian semiotic environment without necessarily losing all previous associations or becoming fully standardized. The comparison between rune-like textual graffiti and single rune-like signs further refines this conclusion. The textual graffiti are more widely distributed across church B4 and extend more clearly into the nave and the templon or altar-connection zone. The single signs, by contrast, are concentrated primarily in the narthex and on west-facing surfaces. This distinction suggests that isolated sign-making and textual graffiti did not necessarily belong to the same mode of writing practice. Single signs may represent marking, testing, practice, presence, ownership, counting, imitation, or abbreviated graphic action, whereas textual graffiti imply a more sustained engagement with sequence, layout, and inscription. The difference is therefore not only formal, but also spatial and potentially social.

The relational evidence leads to a similar conclusion. Most rune-like graffiti are not isolated marks on empty surfaces. They are embedded in a dense visual

field that includes crosses, saintly figures, dragons, birds, geometric ornaments, labyrinths, and other graphic elements. In several cases, the graffiti are placed within or near crosses; in others, they occur near saintly or ecclesiastically significant figures. Such placements do not prove that the rune-like system was Christian in origin, nor that all writers understood it in the same way. They do show, however, that the graffiti were seen, placed, and encountered within a Christian visual environment. Their meaning was produced not only by what they may have said, but also by what they were placed by, within, above, or below.

The graphic evidence strengthens this interpretation. The rune-like graffiti share several conventions with Greek and Slavonic written culture: superscript signs, titlo, points, punctuation-like marks, segmentation, and formal correspondences with letters in Greek, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic. The direction of influence cannot always be established, and it would be misleading to explain all formal similarities as direct borrowing from one script to another. The evidence points instead to a shared graphic repertoire: a set of forms, conventions, and visual strategies circulating across several writing systems in a Christian environment. This is why the rune-like graffiti can be analyzed without decipherment. Their graphic organization places them within a broader ecology of writing.

The theoretical contribution of this article is the proposal to approach such material through a sociography of graffiti, or graffiti sociography. By this term I understand the study of graffiti as socially situated written artefacts: produced by agents with varying degrees of graphic competence, placed on specific surfaces, oriented toward human and/or divine audiences, and interacting with other texts, images, signs, and sacred objects in the same space. This approach adapts questions normally associated with manuscript sociography to informal inscriptions and graffiti. It asks not only what a text says, but who may have produced or encountered it, where it was placed, what graphic competence it implies, what surface it occupies, and how it participates in a wider visual and ritual field. Graffiti sociography is especially useful when encountering undeciphered or partially legible material. It allows us to analyze writing not only as text, but as action, placement, presence, imitation, memory, and visual participation. In this perspective, graffiti are not marginal additions to sacred space. They are part of the social and material life of writing. They preserve traces of agents who used, copied, recognized, approximated, or responded to writing in ways that do not always correspond to formal literacy or to fully controlled textual production.

The article also opens several directions for future research. First, the distinction between single signs and textual graffiti should be investigated systematically across the entire Murfatlar complex. Are single rune-like signs spatially, socially, or functionally different from textual rune-like graffiti? Do they represent practice, ownership, presence, counting, imitation, or another type of graphic action? Second, the spatial behaviour of rune-like graffiti should be compared in greater detail with Greek, Cyrillic, Glagolitic, and uncertain graffiti in church B4 and in the wider complex. Such a comparison could show whether the rune-like material fol-

lows the same spatial logic as other scripts or whether it represents a distinct mode of access and participation. Third, future work should examine whether rune-like graffiti are more frequently associated with pictorial graffiti, crosses, geometric ornaments, or other non-textual motifs than Greek or Slavonic graffiti. If so, this may suggest that rune-like writing participated more strongly in an image-writing practice than in a strictly textual practice. Fourth, the distinction between privileged surfaces and residual surfaces should be developed further. Graffiti placed at standing height, on visible pillars, near the altar, within crosses, or close to saintly figures occupy a different spatial position from graffiti placed low on walls, on crowded surfaces, or in damaged and secondary areas. This distinction may help refine questions of chronology, access, social status, and competition for space. Fifth, the relationship between visibility and proximity should be investigated more fully. Some graffiti may have been placed to be seen by other people; others may have been placed near an altar, cross, saintly figure, or sacred boundary even if they were not especially visible. This distinction is theoretically important because the audience of writing in a church space may be human, divine, or both. Sixth, cases of avoidance, overlap, damage, and coexistence need to be analyzed as evidence of relative chronology and social perception. When graffiti avoid each other, earlier marks may have been recognized as meaningful traces. When they overlap or damage one another, the surface may preserve evidence of conflict, reorganization, ritual reaction, or changing attitudes toward earlier writing.

An important reservation must be added. Rune-like graffiti and single signs are not confined to the churches, crypts, and other sacred spaces of the Murfatlar complex. Rune-like graffiti also occur in the quarry, which constitutes approximately 80 per cent of the preserved complex and cannot be regarded as a sacred space[17]. The quarry predates the construction of the churches. In some cases, the height of the signs appears to correspond to the levels of the ramps used by the stonecutters as the excavations were deepened. It is therefore possible that at least some rune-like signs outside the sacred spaces belong to a different phase, context, or mode of graphic practice from that of the rune-like graffiti analyzed in church B4.

This observation is methodologically important. Before the relation between the rune-like material in the quarry and that found in the churches can be assessed securely, a systematic palaeographic comparison is needed. It remains to be established whether the same sign forms, hands, graphic conventions, and modes of execution occur in both contexts, or whether the quarry material and the church material represent different uses of visually similar signs. The present article does therefore not assume that all rune-like graffiti of the Murfatlar complex belong to a single homogeneous practice. It focuses instead on the rune-like graffiti in church B4 and asks how these particular graffiti functioned after being placed within a Christian architectural, visual, and ritual environment.

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[17] See footnote 7.

The broader implication is that the transition from non-Christian to Christian literacy should not be understood as a simple replacement of one system by another. Murfatlar instead points to coexistence, imitation, partial competence, appropriation, conflict, and gradual re-coding of graphic practices. The rune-like graffiti show that Christianization could operate through the recontextualization of writing: through the incorporation of existing graphic habits into sacred spaces where writing could function as presence, invocation, imitation, memory, and visual participation. The case of Murfatlar therefore contributes to the study of medieval literacy by expanding the kinds of evidence that can be used when texts cannot be read. It demonstrates that undeciphered graffiti can still speak historically if they are analyzed as situated graphic practices. Their value lies not only in what they may one day be shown to say, but also in what they already reveal about writing, space, agency, and religious transformation.

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НЕРАЗЧЕТЕНА ПИСМЕНОСТ В ХРИСТИЯНСКО ПРОСТРАНСТВО: РУНОПОДОБНИТЕ ГРАФИТИ ОТ МУРФАТЛАР И ПРЕХОДЪТ ОТ ЕЗИЧЕСКА КЪМ ХРИСТИЯНСКА ПИСМЕНОСТ

(Резюме)

Средновековният скален комплекс в Мурфатлар съхранява изключително голям корпус от графити, както рисунки, така и гръцки, кирилски и глаголически текстови графити, както и значителна група графити, изпълнени в неразчетена графична система, която условно се определя като руноподобна. Въпреки че тези руноподобни графити все още не могат да бъдат прочетени със сигурност, настоящата статия изхожда от тезата, че те не са исторически неми. С фокус върху църква „B4“ изследването разглежда как една неразчетена писменост може да бъде анализирана като писмена практика чрез пространствени, релационни и графични данни. Анализът проследява къде са разположени графитите в рамките на църквата, как се отнасят към кръстове, светителски фигури, изобразителни графити и други текстови графити, както и по какъв начин тяхната подредба и графични маркери съответстват на конвенции, познати и от гръцката и славянската писмена култура. Резултатите показват, че руноподобните графити са пространствено интегрирани в църквата, често са свързани с визуално и ритуално значими повърхности и са вписани в християнизирана графична среда. Прави се също разграничение между руноподобни текстови графити и изолирани руноподобни знаци, които показват различни модели на разпространение и могат да отразяват различни типове графично действие. Статията предлага „социография на графитите“ като методологическа рамка за изследване на графитите като социално ситуирани писмени артефакти, създадени от агенти с различна степен на графична компетентност и взаимодействащи с текстове, изображения, повърхности и сакрални обекти. Чрез преместване на вниманието от разчитането към писмената практика статията допринася за по-широкото разбиране на християнизацията на писмеността като процес на реконтекстуализация, при който по-стари или алтернативни графични навици могат да бъдат включени в християнското ритуално пространство.

Ключови думи: Мурфатлар; средновековни графити; руноподобна писменост; неразчетена писменост; социография на графитите; пространствено разпространение; релационен контекст; графичен репертоар; християнизация на писмеността.

Antoaneta Granberg
University of Gothenburg, Sweden
antoaneta.granberg@sprak.gu.se
ORCID: 0000-0002-4200-4072

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