DOI: 10.31743/amsn.18415

ACTA MEDIAEVALIA.
SERIES NOVA II (2025)

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Graffiti from the Church of the Holy Trinity in Berat, Albania: A Glimpse into Medieval Protective and Pilgrim Culture[1]

Abstract: This study provides the first in-depth documentation and analysis of the graffiti inscribed on the columns of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Berat, Albania. While the church itself has been extensively studied, its graffiti have remained largely overlooked in scholarly discourse. The present research aims to address this gap by systematically documenting and categorizing the graffiti, thereby illuminating their historical, social, and religious significance. Despite their limited number, the graffiti offer valuable new data, providing insights into both personal and communal religious practices. Moreover, these inscriptions reflect broader cultural interactions that have shaped the church's history from its construction through the early modern period. The presence of these inscriptions suggests that the church was not only a place of worship but also a focal point for diverse social and spiritual expressions, including pilgrimage activities. By addressing the lack of extant historical records concerning these informal inscriptions, this study enhances our understanding of the multifaceted past of the church. The graffiti reveal how individuals engaged with the sacred space over the centuries, leaving behind traces of devotion, identity, and cul-

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[1] We would like to thank Mr Ioannis Vitaliotis of the Research Centre for Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art at the Academy of Athens, Greece and Mr Dimitris Liakos of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Chalkidiki and Mount Athos, Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, Greece, for their invaluable assistance in our research.

tural exchange. This research amplifies the voices of individuals often absent from official narratives, offering a more nuanced perspective on the role of graffiti in medieval and early modern religious settings.

Keywords: Byzantine Albania, graffiti documentation, cross graffiti, khachkar, pilgrimage

Introduction

The Church of the Holy Trinity in Berat is one of the most significant examples of late Byzantine architecture in Albania and the Balkans, reflecting the influence of Byzantine architectural traditions combined with local elements. Situated on a sloping terrain adjacent to the surrounding wall of the Citadel (the second enclosure of Berat Castle) (Fig. 1), this small church embodies the historical, cultural, and religious significance of the region.

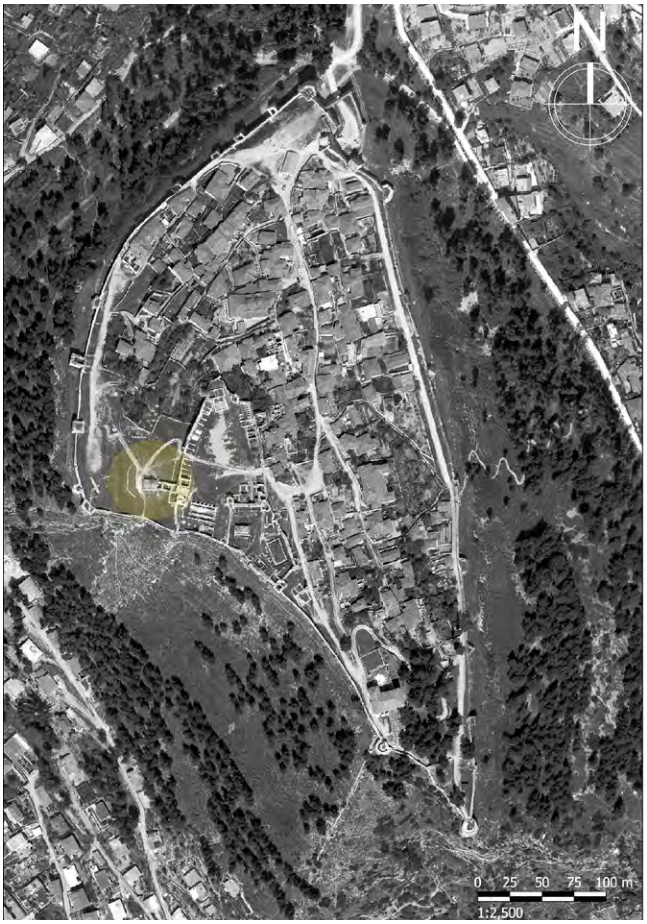

Fig. 1: Orthophoto of the Berat Castle (2019)

While the church itself is an important architectural and spiritual landmark, what makes it particularly intriguing are the traces of history left by visitors and residents over the centuries. Among them are the graffiti carved into its columns, which offer a unique lens into the social and cultural lives of those who interacted with this sacred space. These graffiti, which range from texts to complex drawings and symbols, serve as invaluable historical records preserved in their original context.[2] The presence of such signs is considered to be relatively uncommon in Orthodox churches, or at least it was thought to be so until recently.[3] To date, only a limited number of cases have been documented and studied within the territory of Albania (Fig. 2). Observations of 'similar' cases have been recorded on the southern façade of the Church of the Monastery of St John Vladimir (Shijon, Elbasan),[4] in the Monastery of the Forty Saints (Saranda)[5] and in the Church of the Monastery of St Nicholas (Mesopotam),[6] among others.[7]

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2 Graffiti is defined as a form of graphic expression that includes illustrations and texts, carved or displayed on natural or man-made surfaces, which were not originally intended for writing. For more, see M. G. Trentin, 'Medieval and Early Modern Graffiti in Eastern Mediterranean: A New Methodological Approach', in *Graffiti Scratched, Scrawled, Sprayed: Towards a Cross-Cultural Understanding*, ed. by O. Škrabal, L. Mascia et al., Berlin – Boston 2023, 403; S. Kalopise-Verte, M. Panayotidi-Kesisoglou, *Multilingual Illustrated Dictionary of Byzantine Architecture and Sculpture Terminology*, Crete 2010, 407, Fig. 835.

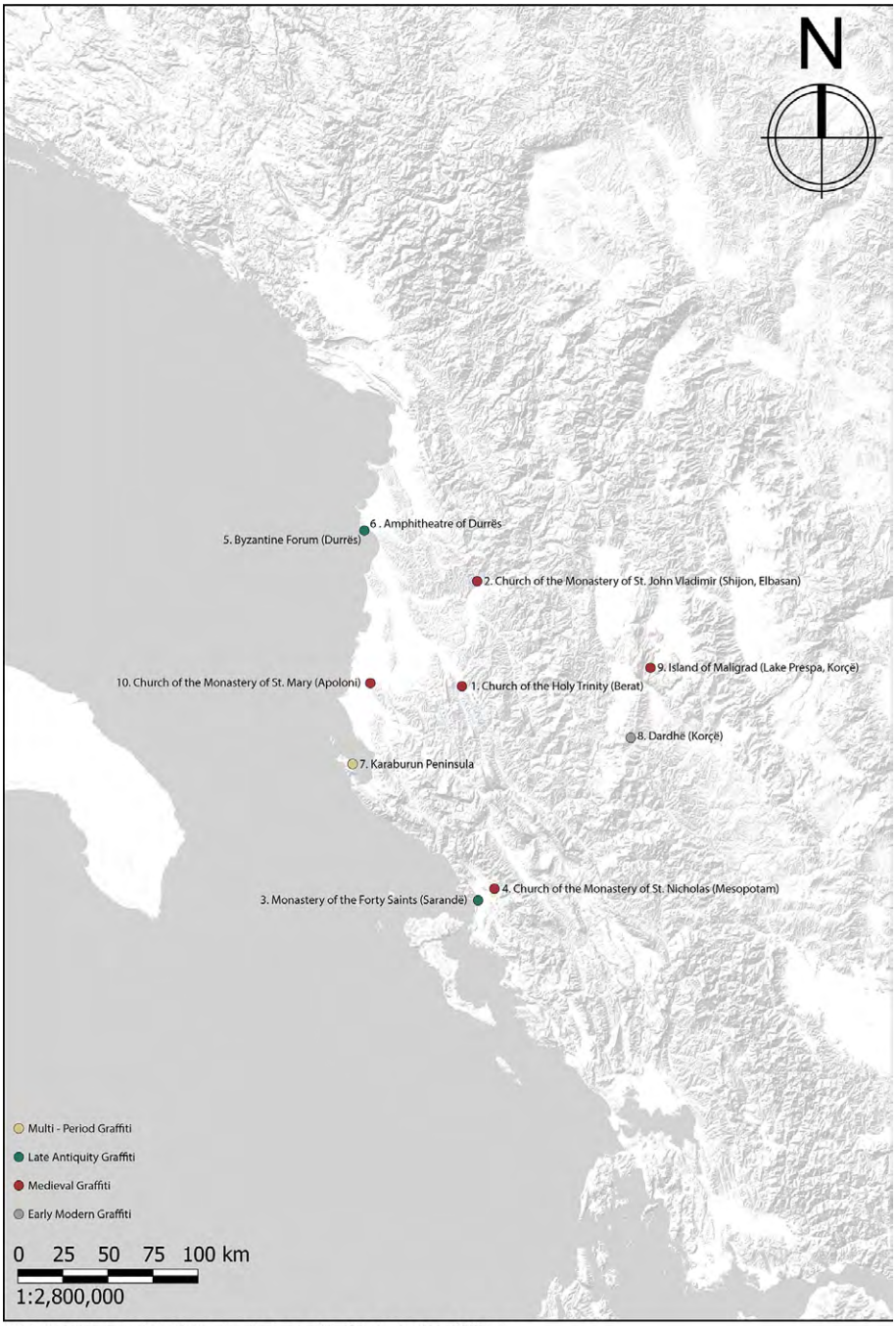
3 The phenomenon of graffiti in sacred spaces is not an isolated occurrence; rather, it has been an integral part of Christian practice – and, by extension, wider human culture – for centuries. However, despite their historical importance, little or no attention has been paid to the study of these markings in churches across Albanian territory.

4 E. Hobdari, 'From Early Christian to Modern: The History of Marble Artifacts in the Monastery of St John Vladimir (Elbasan, Albania)', in *Metamorphoses*, ed. by I. Dosseva, M. Kuyumdzhieva et al., Sofia 2024, 125–40.

5 G. Muka, 'Bazilika që dha emrin Sarandës', *Monumentet*, 44 (2002), 30.

6 G. Giakoumis, G. Karaiskaj, 'Të dhëna të reja arkitekturore dhe epigrafike për vendndodhjen dhe katolikonin e Manastirit të Shën Nikollës në Mesopotam (Shqipëri e jugut)', *Monumentet*, 46 (2004), 77–85.

7 Other documented sites include the Amphitheatre of Durrës (L. Miraj, 'Përshtatjet në amfiteatër gjatë shekujve VII–XII', *Monumentet*, 41–42 (1991), 47–57), the Byzantine Forum (Durrës) (G. Muka, 'Rotonda e Durrësit', *Monumentet*, 45 (2003), 7–24), the Karaburun Peninsula (M. Zeqo, 'Rezultate të kërkimeve arkeologjike në Karaburun e në Rrëzën e Kanalit', *Monumentet*, 34 (1987), 153–73), the Island of Maligrad (Lake Prespa, Korçë) (Z. Marika, 'Vizatime në shkëmbin e Maligradit', *Monumentet*, 49 (2007), 91–95), the village of Dardhë (Korçë) (M. Velo, 'Punime në gur në fshatin Dardhë të Korçës', *Monumentet*, 45 (2003), 83–95), and the



* This map includes only the forms classified as graffiti within the territory of Albania

Fig. 2: Map of the graffiti in the territory of Albania

These carvings are more than simple signs; they are testaments to the history of the castle and the church itself, reflecting personal devotion and historical events that shaped the surrounding community. When systematically catalogued and analysed, these graffiti emerge as valuable historical and theological artifacts, offering new perspectives on the past of Berat and the church itself.

This article analyses the graffiti in question, offering insights into their artistic, religious, historical, and cultural significance. Through a thorough examination of these markings, it becomes evident that the Church of the Holy Trinity has functioned not only as a place of worship but also as a living canvas for the articulation of faith, identity, and collective memory over centuries.

Architecture

The construction of the church dates back to the last quarter of the thirteenth century, and its architectural plan is configured as a cross-in-square with two columns.[8] This represents a provincial variant of the style.[9] A narthex, covered with a cylindrical vault with an east-west orientation, is attached to the initial planimetry, while the central part is covered at the highest level with a spherical dome. The interior is illuminated by three double windows, one on each façade, and is connected

Monastery of St Mary in Apollonia (H. Nallbani, 'Të dhëna të reja rreth pikturës së kishës së Manastirit të Apolonisë', *Monumentet*, 11 (1976), 103, 104, Fig. 13).

8 A feature of the Helladic school, also found in the architecture of the Despotate of Epirus. For a more extensive discussion see A. H. S. Megaw, 'The Chronology of Some Middle-Byzantine Churches', *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 32 (1931–32), 126–28; P. L. Vocotopoulos, 'Ο ναός της Παναγίας στην Πρεβέντζα της Ακαρνανίας', *Βυζάντιον: Αφιέρωμα Ανδρέα Ν. Στράτο: Ιστορία–τέχνη και αρχαιολογία*, 1 (1986), 274.

9 Similar examples of Epirote architecture, besides the Church of the Holy Trinity, include the Church of St Mary of Vlaherna (Berat), St Nicholas of Rodia, the Red Church (or Panagia Vella) of Voulgareli in Arta, St George in Angelokastro, Aetolia, etc. These monuments are contemporary and representative of the same architectural school. For a more extensive discussion of architectural parallels and influences, see P. L. Vocotopoulos, 'Church Architecture in the Despotate of Epirus: The Problem of Influences', *ZOGRAF*, 27 (1998), 80; H. Hallensleben, 'Die Architekturgeschichtliche Stellung der Kirche Sv. Bogorodica Peribleptos (Sv. Kliment) in Ohrid', *Zbronik: Arheologski Muzej na Makedonja*, 6–7 (1975), 304–14; A. K. Orlandos, 'Ο Άγιος Νικόλαος της Ροδιάς', *ABME*, 2 (1936), 131–47.

to the nave through an arched entrance. Initially, this entrance served as the main entrance to the nave, but with the addition of the narthex from the original construction, this scheme changed.

The interior of the nave, which is nearly square in its plan, is supported by four central supports that serve as the foundation for the nave's vaulted and domed roof structure.[10] The square bays, delineated by the arms of the cross, are covered at their lowest levels with spherical caps on the west side and with cylindrical vaults oriented from east to west on the east side. The drum, which houses the dome, is elevated above the square formed by the vaults of the arms of the cross, resting on spherical triangles (*pendentives*). The interior space is illuminated by the four drum windows,[11] two double windows (one on each façade), and one located in the apse.

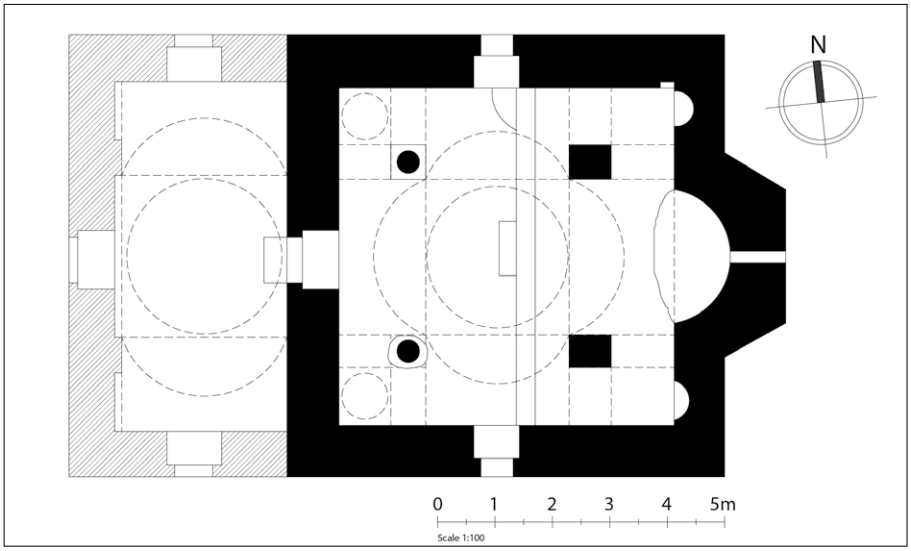


Fig. 3: Floor Plan of the Church of the Holy Trinity

Externally, the arms of the cross and the corresponding ones of the narthex end with elliptical pediments[12] influenced by the metro-

10 Meksi, *Arkitektura e Kishave të Shqipërisë (shek. VII–XV)*, Tirana 2004, 216–17.

11 Meksi, *Arkitektura e Kishave të Shqipërisë (shek. VII–XV)*, 106.

12 The pediments have been recomposed in the form of "Byzantine architecture" characterized by a slightly curved line, despite the fact that their original frames were sloping, a trait that is typical of the Epirote school. The only example encountered of elliptical pediments is the Red Church of Voulgareli in Arta, where

politan architecture of Constantinople or Thessaloniki.[13] The centre of each pediment is articulated by semi-circular brick tympana, slightly recessed into the wall mass. These tympana contain double windows, surrounded by a pair of niches with a quadrant arch supported by a brick window frame.[14] The double window is separated by a stone column with brick capitals on it. The window and the niches on its lateral sides are elevated on two rows of cloisonné masonry, which function as a threshold.

The intersection of the four arms of the cross forms a square base on which the octagonal drum with the dome stands. The drum is adorned with windows on four sides, while the remaining four sides feature niches decorated with a zig-zag pattern of bricks. The corners of the drum have columns of tuff stone,[15] on which capitals also of tuff rest. It is noteworthy that the decorative scheme on all sides of the drum remains consistent, with each niche or window being covered by an arch and surrounded by smaller bricks.[16]

Fig. 4: The southern façade of the church

the roof composition represents a later architectural phase. For further information, see M. Zavorina, 'Palaeologan Architecture on the Byzantine Periphery: The Case of Ohrid', *Niš and Byzantium*, 20 (2022), 305–22.

13 Vocotopoulos, 'Church Architecture in the Despotate of Epirus', 85.

14 S. Ćurčić, *Architecture in the Balkans: From Diocletian to Suleyman the Magnificent*, New Haven 2010, 571.

15 This variety of drum, which is often referred to as the "Athenian" typology, has been identified in Middle (and Late) Byzantine monuments located in central Greece (P. L. Vocotopoulos, 'Η εκκλησιαστική αρχιτεκτονική εις την Δυτικήν Στερεάν Ελλάδα και την Ηπειρον: από του τέλους του 7ου μέχρι του τέλους του 10ου αιώνος', *Βυζαντινα Μνημεια*, 2 (1992), 205).

16 Meksi, *Arkitektura e Kishave të Shqipërisë (shek. VII–XV)*, 218.

The church's masonry consists of two courses, the same for both the nave and the narthex. The lower level is built of stone and lime mortar, with occasional bricks and pieces of tiles placed one on top of the other between the stones. The upper course, on the other hand, is constructed using the cloisonné technique, entailing the placement of a horizontal row of bricks and two vertical bricks between the stones.

Location and typology

A comprehensive analysis of the church's interior and exterior has revealed that the graffiti are concentrated mainly on the two western columns[17] (Fig. 3, Fig. 5). These graffiti were identified at different heights, ranging from ±1.12–2 m. For the sake of clarity and convenience, the southern column is referred to as Column A, while the northern column is referred to as Column B. A notable feature common to both columns is that they are reused architectural elements (*spolia*).[18]

The column referred to as Column A (Plate I, 1), is made of white marble with grey veins and a fine crystalline structure (*prokonnesian*). Its dimensions are as follows: a height of 1.90 m and a diameter of 0.33 m. The material properties of this column are particularly conducive to carving. Column B (Plate I, 2) is made of grey marble with white veins (*prokonnesian*), with a smooth texture. However, it exhibits significant damage on its northwest face. Its dimensions are as follows: a height of 2.90 m and a diameter of 0.38 m. For the purpose of documentation and systematic analysis, each instance of the graffiti has been assigned a unique identifier (ID). The designation consists of the column code (A or B) followed by a sequential number ranging from 01 to 10.

An important issue to highlight in this section of our study is the condition of the columns, which hold a considerable number of

17 Faint traces of graffiti have also been found on the walls near the main entrance to the narthex. However, due to the deterioration of the frescoes over the centuries, it is difficult to confirm their details with certainty.

18 For more details, see D. Fiorani, 'Aspects of Albania's Architectural Heritage and Proposals for Its Conservation: the Church of St Mary of Vllaherna, the Church of the Holy Trinity and the Red Mosque in Berat', in *Heritage in Albania: Centre for Restoration of Monuments in Tirana*, ed. by D. Fiorani, C. Compostella, Rome 2011, 33; D. Çoku, G. Samimi, *Kishat e kalasë së Beratit: Arkeologji – Histori – Arkitekturë – Restaurim*, Tirana 2019, 142.

documented graffiti already in poor condition. The graffiti visible today represent only a fraction of what once existed. This degradation is attributed primarily to numerous structural interventions undertaken within the church over the course of several centuries. The most significant of these interventions involved the application of lime paint to the columns, among other elements, followed by cleaning operations during conservation and restoration campaigns. These interventions, frequently involving the use of harsh tools, have rendered many of the graffiti indistinguishable to the naked eye or when examined under artificial lighting.

In the effort to categorize this graffiti typologically, two methodological questions emerge: What criteria should be used for typological definitions? Should typologies be based solely on two-dimensional forms, or should three-dimensional characteristics, such as the depth of carving, also be included?

To answer the first question, a two-pronged methodological strategy was employed. The primary approach, based on the work of Matthew Champion, functioned as a foundational framework, positing that inscriptions should be considered as a distinct written form, thereby encompassing all of them without exception.[19] Champion's seminal contribution was the

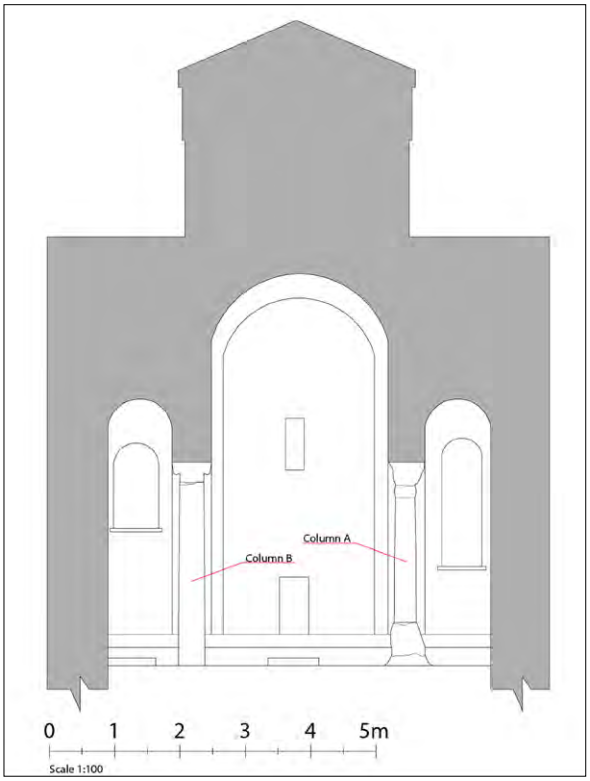


Fig. 5: Cross section of the church

[19] M. Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches*, London 2015; M. G. Trentin, 'Form, Content, and Space: Methodological Challenges in the Study of Medieval and Early Modern European Graffiti', *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 30.1 (2021), 11, Fig. 1 (a taxonomy of medieval graffiti by Matthew Champion).

implementation of a systematic approach that included the classification of graffiti types according to a standardised nomenclature. This approach stands in contrast to that of scholars who often use inconsistent terminology, thereby expanding the vocabulary of reference rather than promoting a unified lexicon. While Champion's framework provides a solid foundation, it notably lacks a detailed sub-classification for crosses. Consequently, the second approach focused on addressing this gap by categorizing crosses based on their specific characteristics.[20]

Regarding the second question of dimensionality, the study focused on two-dimensional features. This decision was driven by the absence of sophisticated tools, such as photogrammetry,[21] laser scanning or RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging), which would have facilitated the creation of accurate three-dimensional models.[22] As a result, the absence of three-dimensional documentation imposes substantial constraints on the analytical and interpretive potential of the study. Without high-resolution, three-dimensional metric models, it becomes impossible to obtain precise measurements of carving depths, an essential parameter for assessing the force and consistency of incisions, which can help interpret the tools used and the physical effort involved. Furthermore, lacking three-dimensional of tiny tool marks that often go unnoticed in conventional photographs or two-dimensional visual surveys. These subtle marks can provide valuable insights into the types of instruments employed, such as chisels, knives, or pointed tools,[23] and help differentiate between

[20] The absence of a defined methodology for the analysis of graffiti results in the emergence of diverse approaches, each corresponding to a distinct cataloguing/descriptive practice. For a more extensive discussion see Trentin, 'Medieval and Early Modern Graffiti in Eastern Mediterranean', 401–2.

[21] M. Caine, D. Altaratz et al., 'The Riddle of the Crosses: The Crusaders in the Holy Sepulchre', in Proceedings of the *Electronic Visualisation and the Arts (EVA) Conference*, 9–13 July 2018, 135–36.

[22] For more see R. G. Taylor, M. Callaghan et al., 'Reflectance Transformation Imaging for the Recording of Incised Graffiti: A Case Study from the Maya Site of Holtun, Guatemala', *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, 12.2 (2024), 122–32; Z. Georgieva, N. Prahov et al., 'Advanced Photographic Methods in Studying Ship Graffiti from Medieval Churches in Nessebar', *Interdisciplinary Studies*, 27 (2022), 21–40; M. G. Trentin, D. Altaratz et al., 'Historic Graffiti as a Visual Medium for the Sustainable Development of the Underground Built Heritage', *Sustainability*, 15 (2023), 13–14.

[23] H. Mytum, J. R. Peterson, 'The Application of Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) in Historical Archaeology', *Historical Archaeology*, 52 (2018), 496–98.

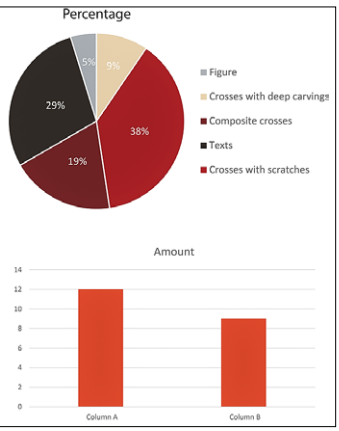
artistic carving styles and those made by unskilled individuals. Most importantly, missing stratigraphic depth data inhibits any meaningful attempt to reconstruct the sequence in which overlapping or neighbouring elements were engraved (if present). This information is crucial for determining whether a composition changed over time through multiple interventions or was created as a single act.[24] As a consequence, the extent of the available interpretations is restricted to superficial visual observations and comparative analysis. This offers only a preliminary basis for more detailed future studies.

As previously mentioned, only a small fraction of the graffiti that once existed in the churches has been documented. A total of twenty-one graffiti were documented, the majority of which were identified as crosses. The following table presents a classification system for these groups:

1. Crosses, further classified into:
   a – crosses with deep carvings;
   b – crosses with scratches;
   c – composite crosses;
2. Texts;
3. Figure.

No.	ID	Typology	Location	Dimensions
1	A01	cross with deep carvings	Column A	6,93 x 5,43 cm
2	A02	composite cross	Column A	22,22 x 10,20 cm*
3	A03	cross with scratches	Column A	7,69 x 5,11 cm
4	A04	composite cross	Column A	6,06 x 3,76 cm
5	A05	composite cross	Column A	4,32 x 3,67 cm
6	A06	cross with scratches	Column A	3,98 x 2,66 cm
7	A06/1	cross with scratches	Column A	0,60 x 0,67 cm
8	A06/2	cross with scratches	Column A	0,93 x 0,58 cm
9	A07	cross with scratches	Column A	11,41 x 5,30 cm
10	A08	cross with scratches	Column A	3,17 x 3,50 cm
11	A09	composite cross	Column A	3,14 x 2,72 cm
12	A10	figure	Column A	0,13 x 0,16 cm
13	B01	cross with deep carvings	Column B	8,25 x 5,66 cm
14	B02	text	Column B	6 x 1,80 cm**
15	B03	text	Column B	2 x 1,26 cm**
16	B04	text	Column B	8 x 3,60**
17	B05	text	Column B	5 x 1,90 cm**
18	B06	text	Column B	5,64 x 8,99 cm**
19	B07	text	Column B	2,76 x 7,85 cm*
20	B08	cross with scratches	Column B	3,36 x 2,27 cm
21	B09	cross with scratches	Column B	1,79 x 1,68 cm

*Overall dimension of the cross
**Overall dimension of the text



Tab. 1: Documented inscriptions from the Church of the Holy Trinity and their classification according to typologies

[24] The case of the Wildenstein coat of arms (Fig. 10.) and the unknown coat of arms (Fig. 11.) at the St Helena Chapel in the Holy Sepulchre Basilica in Jerusalem. For more information, see Trentin, Altaratz et al., 'Historic Graffiti as a Visual Medium', 14–15.

Crosses with deep carvings

Two examples of this sub-typology of crosses have been documented, designated A01 and B01. These crosses are carved on the eastern faces of Columns A and B, oriented towards the altar. The vertical axis of each cross is carved significantly deeper than the horizontal axis and has a V-shaped cut, indicating a consistent technique. Absent a three-dimensional model, determining the exact depth of the conditions has proven unfeasible. Preliminary assessment indicates that both crosses were likely carved by the same individual.

Given that the columns are spolia, it is possible that the carving of the crosses symbolized their 'baptism' or Christianization, a practice which is well documented throughout the Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period.[25] This innovation enabled the reuse of ancient materials, reducing costs while imbuing the objects with new spiritual significance.

Further evidence suggests that the individual responsible for the carvings was presumably employed in either the construction industry or as a church custodian. Despite the fact that graffiti was generally prohibited within ecclesiastical buildings as a form of vandalism, the prominent and symbolically significant location of these specific carvings leads to the supposition that they were not necessarily illicit. Instead, it appears that these practices were tolerated, if not implicitly endorsed, by ecclesiastical authorities. Indeed, arriving at definitive conclusions about whether such graffiti constituted authorised or illicit writings is very difficult in the absence of explicit bans or other documented evidence of disapproval or approval.[26]

Cross A01, with overall dimensions of 6.93 × 5.43 cm, is characterized by a relatively simple workmanship with visible irregularities (Fig. 6). The vertical axis is almost straight and tapers to a point at the end, while the horizontal arms are asymmetrical in both width and length, ending in blunt and angular ends. The arms are situated slightly below the midpoint of the vertical beam, with the right arm positioned significantly lower. It is evident that the artist originally intended to carve

[25] H. Saradi, 'The Use of Ancient Spolia in Byzantine Monuments: The Archaeological and Literary Evidence', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 3.4 (1997), 395, 403–04, 422.

[26] M. P. Ritsema van Eck, 'Graffiti in Medieval and Early Modern Religious Spaces: Illicit or Accepted Practice? The Case of the Sacro Monte at Varallo', *Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis*, 131.1 (2018), 54–55.

a 'Greek cross',[27] though the execution is deemed to be somewhat flawed. The surface of the cross shows evidence of the use of a pointed chisel.

Cross B01, measuring 8.25 × 5.66 cm, shows similar pointed chisel work to Cross A01, although it is characterized by a better execution (Fig. 6). The vertical axis maintains a consistent width, while the horizontal arms extend outward with irregular edges, some of which appear chipped or fragmented. These irregularities may have been created during the work or by later damage. Unlike Cross A01, B01 adheres to the 'Latin cross' typology.[28]

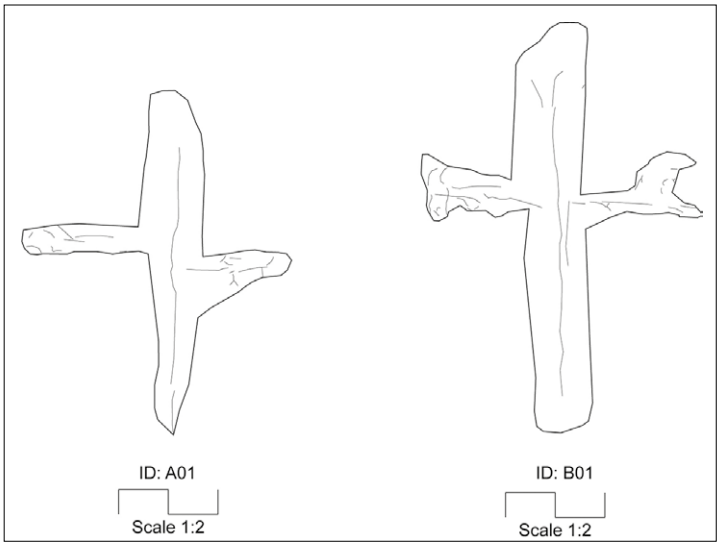


Fig. 6: Crosses with deep carvings

Crosses with scratches

This sub-typology displays the largest number of crosses, eight in total, with the majority (six) present on Column A.

Cross A03 measuring 7.69 × 5.11 cm, is located on the eastern side of the column, 5 cm below Cross A01. It presents a simple work with

[27] The Greek cross is a geometric shape with four equal-length arms that intersect at right angles at their midpoints. This configuration gives it perfect fourfold rotational symmetry and an overall square-like appearance. Based on Fig. 7. A., on the typology of crosses at the Saint Helena Chapel in the Complex of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – A. Re'em, M. Caine et al., 'Historical Archaeology of Medieval Pilgrimage: Dating the "Walls of the Crosses" in the Holy Sepulchre Chapel of St Helena', in *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Region,* ed. by Y. Gadot, Y. Zelinger et al., Jerusalem 2022, 15.

[28] In contradistinction to the Greek cross, which is distinguished by arms of equal length intersecting at the centre, the Latin cross is characterized by a longer vertical arm intersected by a shorter horizontal arm positioned above the midpoint. Based on Fig. 7. B., on the typology of crosses at the Saint Helena Chapel in the Complex of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – Re'em, Caine et al., 'Historical Archaeology of Medieval Pilgrimage', 15.

repeated linear scratches and follows the typology of the 'Greek cross' (Fig. 7). Preliminary observations suggest that it may represent a preparatory phase for the process of deepening the shafts, as evidenced by Crosses A01 and B01, indicating that all three were likely created simultaneously.

Crosses A06, **A06/1** and **A06/2**, which are carved on the western face of the column 4 cm below Cross A02, together form a single scene (the Crucifixion). However, due to differences in composition and size, they are catalogued separately (Fig. 7). The central cross, A06, is the largest, measuring 3.98 × 2.66 cm. It is formed by a slightly inclined primary vertical axis and a horizontal axis. Three of its extremities end in dovetails, with two of them including a central line forming the letter 'A' or medallions (?). Two smaller crosses, A06/1 and A06/2, are placed a few millimetres above the central cross and at a short distance from each other (about 1.5 cm). Both are relatively simple, with A06/1 measuring 0.60 × 0.67 cm and A06/2 slightly larger at 0.93 × 0.58 cm. Their smaller sizes appear to have been a deliberate artistic choice, intended to create a sense of depth and visual complexity.

Comparable parallels with Cross A06 have been identified in architectural elements and sculptures of the early and middle Byzantine period.[29] However, these have only been documented in only a limited number of studies and references.[30] In contrast, a considerable number of examples found belong to the context of Late Antiquity, including sites such as Sagalassos,[31] the Dokimeion quarry[32] and the GO3C

[29] A. K. Orlandos, L. I. Vranousis, *Τα Χαράγματα του Παρθενώνος: ήτοι, επιγραφαί χαραχθείσαι επί των κιόνων του Παρθενώνος κατά τους παλαιοχριστιανικούς και βυζαντινούς χρόνους*, Athens 1973, 88 (No. 98), 92 (No. 105), 93 (No. 107), 94 (No. 109).

[30] P. Nowakowski, D. Wielgosz-Rondolino, 'The Rock Inscriptions, Graffiti and Crosses from Quarry GO3C at Göktepe, Muğla District (Turkey)', *Anatolian Studies*, 71 (2021), 112; Re'em, Caine et al., 'Historical Archaeology of Medieval Pilgrimage', 15 (variants A6, B6), 26 (Fig. 13.), 31 (Fig. 16).

[31] L. Lavan, 'The Agorai of Sagalassos in Late Antiquity: An Interpretive Study', in *Field Methods and Post-Excavation Techniques in Late Antique Archaeology*, ed. by L. Lavan, M. Mulryan, Leiden 2015, 335 (cross B), 339, 340, Fig. 14a; I. Jacobs, 'Cross Graffiti as Physical Means to Christianize the Classical City: An Exploration of Their Function, Meaning, Topographical, and Socio-Historical Contexts', in *Graphic Signs of Identity, Faith, and Power in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by I. H. Garipzanov, C. Goodson et al., Cursor Mundi, 27, Turnhout 2017, 202, Fig. 6.7, 203, Fig. 6.8, 204.

[32] J. Röder, 'Marmor Phrygium. Die antiken Marmorbrüche von İscehısar in Westanatolien', *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, 86 (1971), 292 (Abb. 35), 294, 298 (Abb. 27Di).

Göktepe quarry.[33] Within the Albanian territory, the cross type in question is mainly associated with Late Antique bricks.[34]

Cross A07 has overall dimensions of 11.41 × 5.30 cm and is inscribed on the northern face of the column. It consists of two compositions: the first is a frame in the form of a half-finished rhombus (7.90 × 5.30 cm), accompanied by a smaller rhombus situated at the end. The central element is the cross itself, which divides the space into four squares, each of which contains the two-line formula IH XC ИI KA[C] 'Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς νίκα – Jesus Christ Conquers' (Fig. 7).

The formula's origins can be traced back to the Byzantine traditions. The initial associations of the cross are believed to originate from Constantine's vision of the cross, accompanied by the phrase 'ἐν τούτῳ νίκα' ('In this [sign], you will conquer').[35] The concept of triumph through the cross gained importance in Byzantine numismatic practices during the reign of Constans II (641–658)[36] and eventually evolved into the acronym IC XC NI KA.[37] This formula gained particular prominence within liturgical traditions, as evidenced by its inclusion on the *prosphora*, the bread used during the Eucharist.[38] The earliest documented connection with liturgical practices dates back to the seventeenth century, as recorded in the Euchologion of Goar.[39] However, textual and archaeological evidence suggests that the initials IC XC NI KA were used as a symbol

33 Nowakowski, Wielgosz-Rondolino, 'The Rock Inscriptions, Graffiti and Crosses', 87–128, examples: PG10, PG16, PG17, PG18 and PG21.

34 E. Hobdari, E. Nikolli et al., 'Raport i punës arkeologjike të vitit 2022 në bazilikën paleokristiane jashtë mureve të Scampis', *Candavia*, 10 (2024), 166, Fig. 30, SF.192 (MAT 16771), SF. 602, SF. 702, SF. 709 dhe SF. 710; E. Hobdari, Y. Cerova, 'Bazilika paleokristiane extra-muros e Scampis (Elbasan) – 2012', *Iliria*, 37 (2013), 421, 424, Tab. VIII/1; K. Zheku, 'Zbulime epigrafike në muret rrethuese të kalasë së Durrësit', *Monumentet*, 3 (1972), 39, Fig. 9.

35 Eusebius Pamphilus, 'Life of Constantine, Book I, Chapter XXVIII', in *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine, in Four Books, from 306 to 337 A.D.*, London 1845, 26; C. Morrisson, *Catalogue des monnaies byzantines de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris 1970, 450–51, ref. 4.

36 Morrisson, *Catalogue des monnaies byzantines*, 331.

37 The earliest documented instance of the utilisation of this formula transpired during the reign of Emperor Leo III, wherein he initiated the minting of a silver coin (*miliaresio*) subsequent to the coronation of Constantine IV as co-emperor on 31 March 720. See C. Walter, 'IC XC NI KA: The Apotropaic Function of the Victorious Cross', *Revue des études byzantines*, 55 (1997), 195; J. Moorhead, 'Iconoclasm, the Cross and the Imperial Image', *Byzantion*, 55.1 (1985), 165–79.

38 F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, Oxford 1894, 393.

39 Walter, 'IC XC NI KA', 98.

long before this period, in the seventh century, as evidenced by bread stamps bearing these initials.[40] Nevertheless, the exclusive use of these initials as a liturgical symbol remains a subject of debate.

This formula also appears in a number of Byzantine (post-iconoclastic) art forms, including manuscripts, architectural inscriptions and funerary texts,[41] often serving a protective (apotropaic) purpose.[42] For example, Gordana Babic has catalogued twenty-six analogous examples in Raška school churches dating from the late thirteenth century (the Church of St Achilles in Arilje in Serbia, circa 1296) to the late fourteenth century (the Church of the Monastery of Marko, Susica in North Macedonia, circa 1380–1382). Typically these formulas are placed near doors, windows, or entrances, places where evil forces could pass. A total of fourteen of these formulas are located within the church itself or near the sanctuary.[43] It can be assumed that the cases documented by Babic, as well as the case of the Holy Trinity, follow the tradition of earlier church examples, including those identified at the Parthenon in Athens,[44] St Neophytos in Cyprus, Taxiarchis (St Michael Archangel) in Kastoria and St Nicholas Orphanos in Thessaloniki.[45] In Albania, this formula is evidenced on the

40 Walter, 'IC XC NI KA', 199–200.

41 E. A. Khairedinova, 'Fragmenty keramiki s khristianskimi graffiti iz srednevekovykh pogrebenii Kryma', *Antichnaya drevnost' i srednie veka*, 49 (2021), 193–218; N. Constas, 'Death and Dying in Byzantium', in *Byzantine Christianity*, ed. by D. Krueger, A People's History of Christianity, 3, Philadelphia 2006, 135; N. Poulou-Papadimitriou, 'Pottery of the Middle Byzantine Period and the First Centuries of the Venetian Occupation from Petras, Siteia', in *Petras, Siteia – 25 Years of Excavations and Studies*, ed. by M. Tsipopoulou, Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens, 16, Athens 2012, 321, Fig. 10; N. Poulou-Papadimitriou, E. Tzavella et al., 'Burial Practices in Byzantine Greece: Archaeological Evidence and Methodological Problems for Its Interpretation', in *Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe. Archaeological and Historical Evidence*, ed. by M. Salamon, M. Wołoszyn et al., U Źródeł Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 1.1, Cracow – Leipzig – Rzeszów – Warsaw 2012, 377, 407, 413, 415, Fig. 20/3; A. Meksi, D. Komata, 'Kisha e Shën Mërisë e Brrarit', *Iliria*, 17.2 (1987), 221, Fig. 10.

42 C. Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce: le programme iconographique de l'abside et de ses abords*, Paris 1991, 7; Champion, *Medieval Graffiti*, 31.

43 Walter, 'IC XC NI KA', 195; Moorhead, 'Iconoclasm, the Cross and the Imperial Image', 211.

44 Orlandos, Vranousis, *Τα Χαράγματα του Παρθενώνος*, 83 (No. 90), 91 (No. 103), 92 (No. 105), 121 (No. 154).

45 Walter, 'IC XC NI KA', 211.

tombstone of Mihal Sguro (in the Church of St Mary in Brrar),[46] in the Bay of Karaburun[47] and on the façade of the Church of St Nicholas in Voskopoja[48] and the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin in the village of Labovë e Kryqit (Gjirokastra).[49] Moreover, a comparison of the calligraphic style of the inscription with that of the frescoes of the second phase of the Church of St Mary in Sinjë (Berat), dated to 1291/92, highlights obvious textual (temporal) similarities,[50] placing the formula in the chronological framework of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century.

Cross A08, measuring 3.17 × 3.50 cm, contains a simple linear cross with a vertical and horizontal axis intersecting in the centre (Fig. 7). The cross is documented on the west side of the column, at a height of 2 m. The horizontal arms extend symmetrically, while the vertical axis is slightly longer, with a break in the line below the intersection.

The cross's unobtrusive execution and positioning imply a private devotional gesture, possibly the act of an individual wishing to reinforce the sanctity of the location through a quiet, personal expression of faith. In this context, the sign fulfils two distinct functions: firstly, as an apotropaic symbol intended to ward off evil, and secondly, as a testament to local devotional practices. Its understated presence may be indicative of the gesture of a pilgrim or worshipper marking their passage or presence in the sacred space, thereby contributing to a layered tradition of inscribed faith.

Cross B08 is part of a complex abstract composition characterized by geometric elements such as triangles, angles, crosses, squares, and straight lines (Fig. 7). It is located on the south side of the column and has overall dimensions of 3.36 × 2.27 cm. Comparable examples

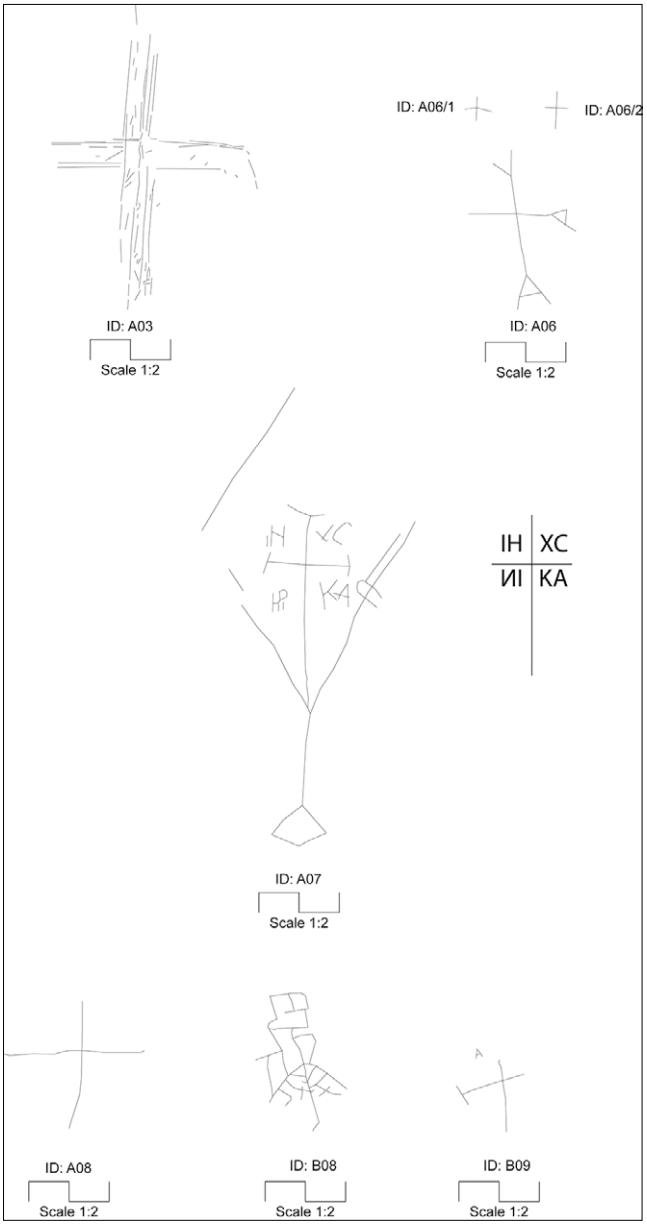
46 Meksi, Komata, 'Kisha e Shën Mërisë e Brrarit', 221, Fig. 10.

47 Zeqo, 'Rezultate të kërkimeve arkeologjike në Karaburun', 160, 171 (Tab. 2, Fig. 18), 173 (Tab. 4, Fig. 25).

48 S. Adhami, 'Tri bazilika të ndërtuara në Voskopojë brenda katër vjetëve', *Monumentet*, 14 (1977), 147–54.

49 Th. Popa, *Mbishkrime të kishave në Shqipëri*, Tirana 1998, 246, No. 604.

50 Dh. Dhamo, 'Korçë, Berat', *Iliria*, 19.2 (1989), 304, Fig. 15.



have been observed at Reç[51] and in Figures 6, 7 and 8 from the rock art of the 'Shpellës në Buzë' (the Buzë Cave) in Mërkurth, Mirdita.[52]

Cross B09, measuring 1.79 × 1.68 cm, is a simple linear cross located approximately 5 mm to the right of Cross B08. Its shape consists of crossed lines, with the vertical axis slightly curved and the arms of the cross intersecting beyond the centre of the axes, resulting in an asymmetrical appearance. Of particular note is the presence of a distinct letter 'A' in the upper left of the cross, a feature that can be attributed to the author of the cross (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Crosses with scratches

[51] M. Korkuti, 'An Attempt for the Interpretation of the Rock Art in Albania', *Valcamonica Symposium*, 22 (2007), 255, 257, Fig. 4.

[52] According to the authors, Figures 6, 7, and 8 are considered Phase II, which is comparable to Rubik, Xibri, Reçi, Bovilë, and Gramata. See R. Ruka, M. L. Galaty et al., 'Arti shkëmbor i "Shpellës në Buzë" në Mërkurth (Mirditë): reflektime mbi inkuadrimin kronologjik', *Candavia*, 4 (2014), 269, Fig. 2, 271, 278.

Composite crosses

As indicated by the nomenclature of this sub-typology, the distinguishing characteristic of the crosses is the combination of lines or scratches with deep carvings on the surfaces of the column.

Cross A02 is an exceptionally intricate motif, potentially associated with the coat of arms of a noble family of its time (Fig. 8). Facing towards west, its overall composition, measuring 22.22 × 10.20 cm, is divided into three distinct sections.

The upper section features a prominent conical-pyramidal floral element, in the shape of a fleur-de-lys with two smaller lateral petals curled downward. At its centre, a cross dominates the design, with its horizontal and upper vertical arms subdivided into three equal segments. Each arm terminates in two pointed peaks, forming a structured geometric pattern adorned with two inscribed concentric circles. The lower portion of the cross transitions fluidly into an elongated floral motif that connects to a stylized depiction of a sword, dagger, or spear beneath it, completing the cohesive structural design.

A close examination of Cross A02 reveals a striking stylistic affinity to the typology of Armenian crosses (*khachkar*),[53] known for their elaborate stone-carved designs.[54] This marks the first documented example of such a cross in Albania, a significant historical and cultural milestone. Similar small mural khachkars have been found outside of Armenia, with the earliest dating to the twelfth century.[55] This includes eight or nine recorded examples in Cilicia and two hundred 287 in

[53] From '*khach*' = cross, and '*k'ar*' = stone, P. Donabédian, 'Can We Call "Khachkar" the Sudak Cross-Stones?', *Сугдейський збірник* [Collection of Sugdeia], 7.1 (2018), 304.

[54] H. L. Petrosyan, 'Medieval Armenian Sculpture and the Khachkar (Stone Cross)', in *Armenia: Imprints of a Civilization*, ed. by G. Uluhogian, B. L. Zekiyan et al., Milan 2011, 69–75; K. Harutyunyan, 'The Armenian Monastery of Holy Saviour in Jerusalem and Its Epigraphic Heritage', *Hushardzan' Scientific Journal* [in Armenian], 17.1 (2022), 20 (Fig. 11); M. E. Stone, 'Epigraphica Armeniaca Hierosolymitana', *Revue des Études Arméniennes*, 30 (2005), 444 (Fig. 1), 450 (Fig. 4), 453 (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6), 458 (Fig. 8).

[55] P. Donabédian, 'Small Mural Khachkars in Medieval Armenian Communities of Crimea, Galicia, Podolia, and Bessarabia', in *On the Borderline between the East and the West. Materials of the International Conference Dedicated to the 90th Anniversary of Yaroslav Dashkevych* (December 13–14, 2016, Lviv) 324 <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01933957v1> [accessed 29 July 2025].

Jerusalem.[56] Beyond these two main centres, the tradition spread to various Armenian diaspora communities. Notable among these communities are New Julfa in Isfahan (with 382 examples from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and Crimea (with approximately 200 examples dating between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries). Other significant sites include Aleppo, which had thirty-two examples before its destruction by Islamic extremists in 2015, and Lviv, where 6 examples have been documented.[57]

The author of this graffiti appears to have been consciously influenced by such models, synthesising their distinctive characteristics, particularly the interplay of geometric and symbolic motifs, into the composition's fundamental structure. This influence underscores the dual role of the cross as both an artistic focal point and a cultural symbol, reflecting the creator's aesthetic or cultural preferences.[58]

The final section of the composition portrays a two-dimensional temple, characterized by a four-columned portico, a central pointed dome, and flanking circular towers or smaller domes. While the specific identity of the church remains unknown, its architectural elements align with established Armenian ecclesiastical traditions.[59] Between the cross and the temple, just above the domes, is an animal head, representing either a bull or a goat.

Beyond the flat part of the graffiti contours framing the graffiti (Fig. 8), four fleurs-de-lys are symmetrically arranged (two on each side), fusing motifs from Armenian and French traditions.[60] Slightly off to the left,

[56] The number documented in Jerusalem is based on the article by Donabédian, 'Small Mural Khachkars in Medieval Armenian Communities', 324. However, recent studies suggest that additional crosses of this typology have been identified, although their exact number remains unknown. For further details, see Re'em, Caine et al., 'Historical Archaeology of Medieval Pilgrimage', 7–39.

[57] Donabédian, 'Small Mural Khachkars in Medieval Armenian Communities', 325.

[58] H. L. Petrosyan, 'Khachkar', in *Historical and Cultural Heritage of Armenia*, ed. by K. A. Harutyunyan, Yerevan 2022, 57–64.

[59] H. Sanamyan, 'Construction Art of Medieval Armenia', in *Historical and Cultural Heritage of Armenia*, 47–56.

[60] Just as coins generally use iconography to convey ideological messages, the fleur-de-lys appearing in Armenian graffiti signifies the union of Western and Eastern influences. This reflects the new Western influences entering Cilician Armenian society through commercial and military interactions with Europeans. The nobility adopted many aspects of Western European life, including chivalry, fashion, French titles and names, and the French language. Furthermore, Cilician society itself shifted from traditional structures towards Western feudalism.

a faint carving contains the letter 'A' and a circular medallion. Within the medallion, a barely discernible figure, which appears to be a knight on horseback holding a cross.[61] However, the shallow engraving renders the detail indistinct.[62]

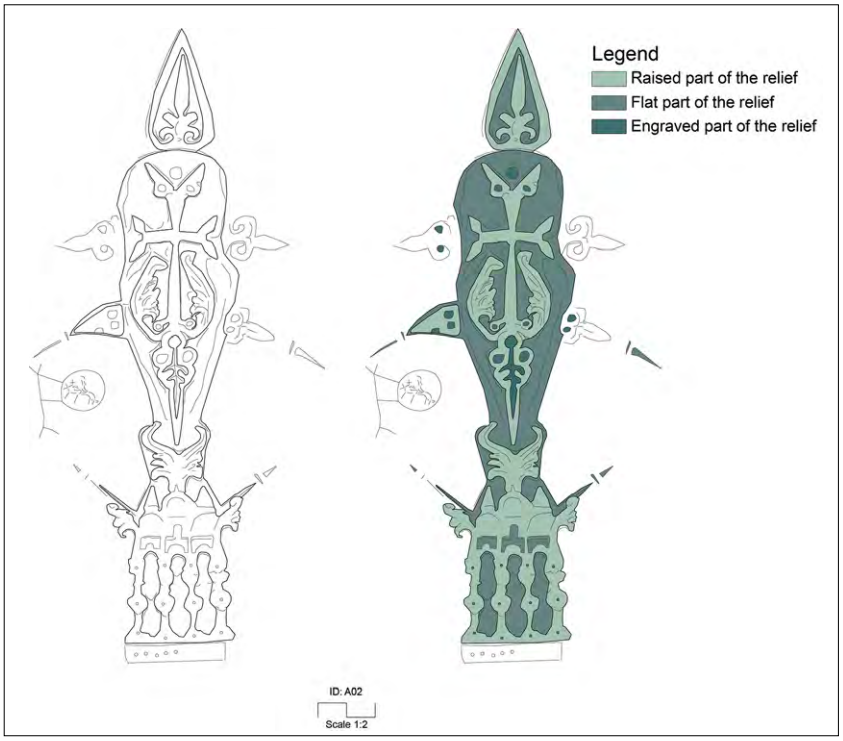


Fig. 8: Composite cross (Armenian Cross–ID: A02)

For more, see A. Atamian Bournoutian, 'Cilician Armenia', in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, I: *The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by R. G. Hovannisian, New York 1997, 280–90; P. Papadopoulou, 'Betwixt Greeks, Saracens and Crusaders. Lusignan Coinage and Its Place in the Eastern Mediterranean (1192–1324)', *Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes Chypriotes*, 43 (2013), 473–92.

61 A similar example, but of a more qualitative execution, has been identified in one of the khachkars in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin (Armenia). The khachkar dates to the year 1576. For more, see Petrosyan, 'Khachkar', 62, Fig. 10.

62 A second example, identified by M. G. Trentin as the act of a crusader, is located in the Church of St Martin in Lucca, Italy. For more details, see M. G. Trentin, 'I graffiti come fonte per la storia delle pratiche religiose medievali' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2010–2011), 177 (ref. 675, example: SMr 58), 493 (example: SMr 58) and 509 (example: SMr 58).

Cross A04, represents a 'Latin cross' measuring 6.06 × 3.76 cm, located on the west side of the column 25 cm beneath Cross A02. It represents a very simple composition of two holes and lines on each side of the arms of the cross, with the exception of the left arm, where no engraved lines were identified (Fig. 9). Based on the analysis of analogous examples from foreign sites, it can be assumed that the cross once had a metallic element attached to it (an *ex-voto*), which was removed.[63]

Cross A05, has a composition analogous to that of Cross A04, yet it is distinguished by a weaker execution of the lines, often wavy. Of particular note is the intersection of the lines in the centre of the cross, resulting in the formation of a square (Fig. 9). We cannot say with certainty that there was a metal appliqué, as is the case for Cross A04, but it can be hypothesized. It has dimensions of 4.32 × 3.67 cm, and it is positioned at a height of 1.97 m westwards.

Cross A09, is similar to cross A05 but has smaller dimensions of 3.17 × 3.50 cm (Fig. 9). It is located on the west side at an approximate height of 2.10 m, making it the only one at that height.

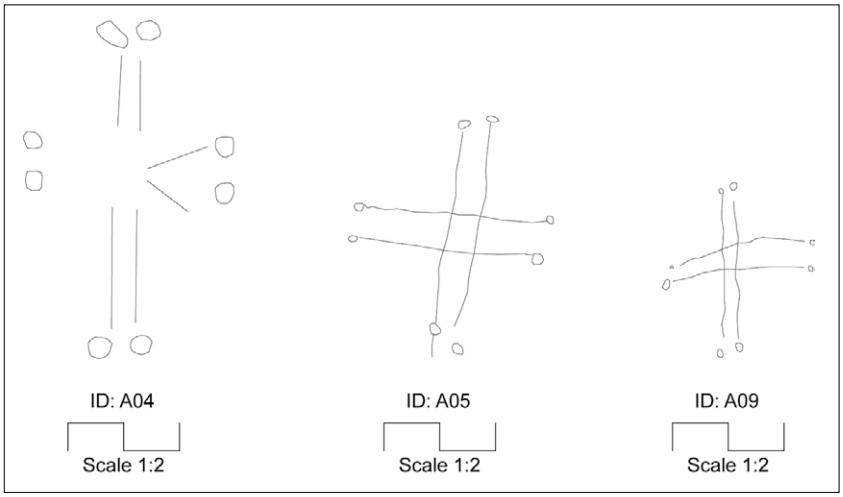


Fig. 9: Composite crosses

[63] A parallel example can be found in the Lower City Church at Amorium (Phrygia, Turkey). For more, see *Amorium Reports 5: A Catalogue of Roman and Byzantine Stone Inscriptions from Amorium and Its Territory, Together with Graffiti, Stamps, and Miscellanea*, ed. by C. S. Lightfoot, Istanbul 2017, V, 137 (Cat. No. M22. T733), 208 (Cat. No. M22. T733).

Texts

It is noteworthy that all documented graffiti inscriptions are found on Column B, although a definitive explanation for this concentration remains elusive. The inscriptions, written in the Greek language, present significant challenges to transcription and translation, largely due to their advanced state of deterioration. This degradation hinders the capacity to provide definitive interpretations; nevertheless, the analysis has sought to document the extant evidence as comprehensively as possible. In instances where legibility allows, provisional transcriptions have been put forward. It is also noteworthy that such writings may have been employed for commemorative or devotional purposes, reflecting personal acts of piety or remembrance within the sacred space.[64]

Text B02, for which no additional information has been provided, consists of eight letters (Fig. 10). It is located on the north face of the column at the height of 1.74 m, its dimensions are 6 × 1.80 cm, and it is transcribed as follows: ΘPINTHYP ('Trinity'?).

Text B03 measures 2 × 1.26 cm and is located 6.50 cm below Text B02. It consists of two letters, κω, which can be rendered as: K(υρί)ῳ meaning 'to the Lord' (?) (Fig. 10).

Text B04, measuring 8 × 3.60 cm, is positioned 6.50 cm below Text B03. It features a simple cross, measuring 2 × 0.9 cm, accompanied by three letters. The transcription is recorded as: + Μουυ T or + Μωυ T (Fig. 10).

Text B05, measuring 5 x 1.90 cm, is located on the east side of the column. Its composition is analogous to that of Text B04, featuring a simple cross measuring 1.80 × 0.88 cm, followed by an inscription that reads: + (Οἶ)Κων Του Θ(ε)ΟΥ (?) meaning 'House of God' (?) (Fig. 10).

Text B06 is the largest in dimensions (8.99 × 5.64 cm) and faces the east, comprising four lines (Fig. 10). The content of this text is challenging to transcribe, but the final line offers a clear reference to a year. The transcription of the text is as follows:

1. + ΤΑμ Τροαρδο (meaning to write Τριάδα, 'Trinity' ?)
2. ολΑ τω χλοου
3. θοΠ μιρμς
4. Ιςτους 1755 (εἰς τοὺς 1755 (?) = in the year 1755).

[64] As demonstrated in the case study by M. G. Trentin. For further details, see Trentin, 'Medieval and Early Modern Graffiti in Eastern Mediterranean', 399.

Text B07 is the second largest in dimensions (7.85 × 2.76 cm) and faces south towards Column A. It consists of two lines, with only the first line being mostly legible (Fig. 10). The transcription of the text is as follows:

1. δ Ϛ ει κ τ θ ω (δέη(σι)ς Κ(υρίῳ) τ(ῷ) Θ(ε)ῷ = Supplication (?) to the Lord and God (?)
2. Γ ν ω σ λ (?).

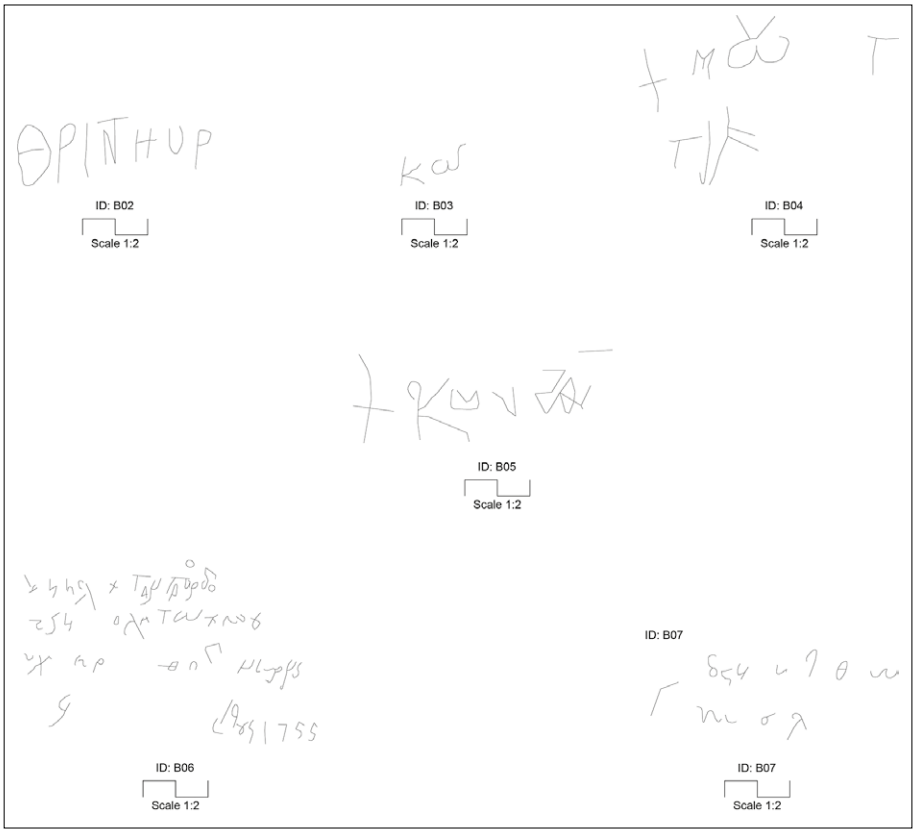


Fig. 10: Texts

Figure

Figure A10, small in size (0.13 × 0.16 cm) and positioned about 3 cm to the left of Cross A02, depicts a schematic human figure with hands raised in the position known as the *orans* (Fig. 11). The term *orans*

(Latin for 'he/she who is praying' or 'a person who prays'[65]) refers to a posture and motif in Christian art and worship, that usually depicts a figure standing with arms outstretched and palms facing upward, symbolizing prayer.[66] In the context of early Christian art, the *orans* was often observed in the catacombs and served as a representation of the soul in a state of prayer or intercession. This posture was used to depict saints, martyrs, or anonymous believers, signifying devotion, openness to divine grace, and the act of offering oneself to God.[67] It is also imbued with the symbolism of resurrection and eternal life. In the context of the liturgy, the *orans* posture has traditionally been associated with the actions of priests during certain prayers, such as the Eucharistic Prayer. However, it was also adopted by lay Christians in both private and community worship practices. The figure of the *orans*, whether depicted individually or in group scenes, continues to serve as a powerful symbol of faith, prayer, and devotion within the broader Christian traditions (e.g. Our Lady of the Sign (*Platytera*), Christ the Almighty (*Pantocrator*), Christ in Majesty (*Deisis*), and so forth).

Fig. 11: Figure A10 (*Orans*)

65 H. H. Ørberg, *Lingua Latina: Pars II: Latin-English Vocabulary II*, Minnesota 2007, 26.

66 The *orans* attitude of prayer has a biblical basis in 1 Timothy 2:8: 'I will therefore desire that men pray in every place, lifting up pure hands, without anger and contention'.

67 G. Foerster, 'A Painted Christian Tomb near Kibbutz Lohamei Ha Geta'ot', in *The Antiquities of the Western Galilee*, ed. by M. Yeda'ia, Mate-Asher 1986, 416–29 [in Hebrew]; T. Michaeli, 'A Painted Tomb in the East Cemetery', in *The Necropolis of Bet Guvrin: Eleutheropolis*, ed. by G. Avni, U. Dahari et al., Jerusalem 2008, 187–99; E. Klein, B. Zissu et al., 'Byzantine Graffiti in Underground Water Facilities in the Galilee and Judean Fothills', *Revue Biblique*, 125.3 (2018), 407–13.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this paper aimed to uncover hidden aspects of medieval and early modern Berat, particularly with regard to graffiti. Despite the lack of literary sources, it seems to have been a widespread phenomenon in churches, and the Church of the Holy Trinity is no exception. These graffiti should be understood as part of a broader phenomenon often observed in sacred spaces, a topic that has received minimal attention or research in Albania. Graffiti, in principle, possessed the potential to convey complicated and conceptual information; however, the manner in which this is interpreted has undergone changes over time and among viewers.

The presence of these intricately carved graffiti, which are often grouped together, serves as a reflection of the existence of a doctrine, that of the protection (prophylactic or apotropaic). The clearest examples are Crosses A01, B01, A03, and A07.[68] The initial three cases can be interpreted as instances of 'baptism', a widespread phenomenon particularly associated with ancient materials. Documentation of such graffiti has been recorded on a variety of architectural surfaces, including columns, lintels, busts, and portraits.[69] Conversely, Cross A07 exhibits a more conventional design, frequently observed in ecclesiastical contexts. Its proximity to both the entrance and the church's central space lends further credence to this interpretation. Dating these examples remains challenging, but it is hypothesized that the 'baptismal' graffiti are contemporary with the construction of the church. In contrast, Cross A07 appears to have been carved at a later date, possibly during the period when the Serbian Empire initiated its conquests in the territories surrounding Berat. According to a contemporary note in the Diptych of the Monastery of St George in the Castle of Berat, written in 1356, the Serbs, led by Tsar Simeon Uroš, behaved very cruelly; 'on the second day, the Serbs and the Wallachians came from [Mount] Tomorr; they even dug up the dead and Skouripekis remained sick for numerous days'.[70]

68 Also Cross A08, which is described above.

69 Saradi, 'The Use of Ancient Spolia in Byzantine Monuments', 395, 403–04, 422.

70 P. Batiffol, 'Les manuscrits grecs de Bérat d'Albanie et le Codex Purpureus Φ', *Archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires*, 13 (1887), appendix 2, 437–556.

Beyond their defensive function, these graffiti also served commemorative, devotional, or votive purposes, as well as serving as markers of status and identity. The graffiti, which include crosses, texts, and figurative depictions, function as visual anchors for ritual practices, reinforcing acts of devotion and embodying faith. As Nicola Hayward emphasizes, the physical dimension of memory in ritual 'is formed through our sensory experience, for it is through our senses that we negotiate our position within the world'.[71] Her observations highlight the way in which ritual evokes memory, with artifacts serving as tangible indicators of faith and prayer.[72] In this context, the graffiti inscribed on the church columns functioned not simply as passive records, but as active agents in shaping memory, continually constructing and redefining spaces of devotion. Repeatedly encountered by worshippers, these graffiti they played a lasting role in reinforcing personal devotion and collective religious identity.

Despite their modest numbers and the challenge of distinguishing between local residents and visitors, including pilgrims and travellers, the impact of these individuals cannot be ignored. Their actions, driven by a desire to immortalize their journey and leave a lasting impression, have left an indelible mark. Though anonymous, such practices were widespread during the medieval period. In these instances, it is believed that pilgrims sought anonymity from both local communities and fellow travellers while ensuring their presence was acknowledged by God. As previously noted, the act of inscribing a text, name or a cross in a sacred space creates a presence that transcends the temporal limitations of a single lifetime and, in a sense, becomes permanent. A particularly noteworthy method employed by these individuals involved the practice of leaving a permanent mark in the form of *ex-voto* offering.[73] Although physical traces of these practices may no longer be visible, the marks they left behind endure, as exemplified by Cross A04. Drawing on analogous examples,[74] this cross likely functioned not as a protective but as a devotional gesture, possibly created by a traveller, whether local

71 N. Hayward, 'Early Christian Funerary Ritual', in *Early Christian Ritual Life*, ed. by R. DeMaris, J. Lamoreaux et al., London – New York 2018, 114.

72 Hayward, 'Early Christian Funerary Ritual', 115.

73 V. Plesch, 'Memory on the Wall: Graffiti on Religious Wall Paintings', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32.1 (2002), 169.

74 *Amorium Reports*, V, 137 (Cat. No. M22. T733), 208 (Cat. No. M22. T733).

or from afar. This interpretation is corroborated by analogous cases from Cyprus and Jerusalem dating from the twelfth century onwards.[75]

Additional candidates for pilgrimage-related carvings include Crosses A05, A06 (A06/1 and A06/2), A09 and B09. While definitively attributing these carvings to acts of pilgrimage remains challenging, a compelling case can be constructed through comparative analysis and contextual evidence. Crucially, the proximity of Crosses A05 and A09 to Cross A04 strongly suggests they were executed later, potentially after the removal of the metal appliqué, as deliberate stylistic imitations. This context provides significant evidence for interpreting these crosses as a sign of visitor pilgrimage. Further supporting this classification is Cross B09, which aligns with the typical markers found on pilgrimage routes. Although simple, the initial next to it indicates this. However, it is difficult to fully verify this without the stratigraphic data of the carvings. Most significantly, Cross A06 and its associated carvings (A06/1 and A06/2) have been found in close proximity to graffiti at major pilgrimage sites, such as Jerusalem and the Church of St Ambrose in Milan.[76] The provision of corroborating evidence serves to substantially reinforce the interpretation of these markings as being pilgrimage-related acts.

In contrast, Cross A02 does not appear to be associated with the lay pilgrimage traditions and instead belongs to a distinct context warranting further in-depth study. The combination of Western elements, such as the fleur-de-lys, and the engraving of a cross of Armenian typology (khachkar) strongly indicates the work of an individual from the Eastern Mediterranean (Levant), potentially Cilicia or Cyprus, whose journey eventually brought him to Berat. This synthesis of cultural elements, coupled with the depiction of a knight bearing a cross (a motif tied to religious military orders), collectively points to the involvement of trans-Mediterranean pilgrimage or crusading networks. The creation of the graffiti is closely associated with the displacement of communities from the Eastern Mediterranean (primarily from the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia) after the Mamluks captured Acre in 1291. This pivotal event triggered westward migration.[77]

75 Trentin, Altaratz et al. 'Historic Graffiti as a Visual Medium', 14.
76 Trentin, 'I graffiti come fonte', 669 (SAM 6), 674 (example: SAM 6).
77 J. N. Claster, *Sacred Violence: The European Crusades to the Middle East, 1095–1396*, Toronto 2009, 286.

While we cannot say that the church ceased functioning after the Ottoman conquest, we do note a second phase of graffiti. As far as we can ascertain, Text B06 is the only one that can be definitively dated to 1755; the others present challenges in terms of definitive chronological attribution. However, a comparative analysis of the calligraphy in Text B06 and on Cross A07 suggests that the former is stylistically closer to Text B06, indicating that these texts were probably written around ± 1755.

Further research into the graffiti from the Church of the Holy Trinity is essential, particularly with regard to the development of a comprehensive typological database. Such a resource would facilitate the long-term preservation of information regarding devotional practices and their evolution within ecclesiastical spaces and beyond. Priority should be given to the application of advanced documentation technologies such as Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), which enhances the visibility of incised details and offers critical insights into inscription techniques, chronological layering and state of preservation. Furthermore, integrating these methods with conservation and restoration strategies will contribute to the sustainable protection of graffiti in monuments. This methodological and interpretative framework will significantly enrich our understanding of medieval religious culture and the material expressions of personal devotion.

Plate I

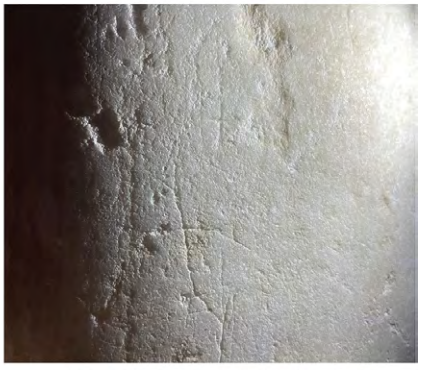
1. Column A

2. Column B

3. Cross with deep carvings (A01)

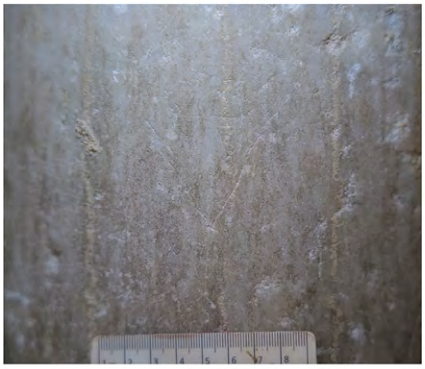
4. Cross with deep carvings (B01)

5. Cross with scratches (A03)

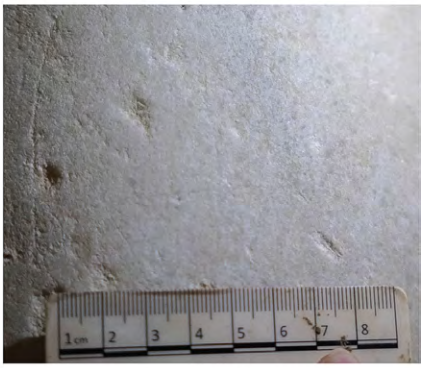


6. Cross with scratches (A06, A06/1, A06/2)

Palte II



7. Cross with scratches (A07)



8. Cross with scratches (A08)

9. Cross with scratches (B08 and B09)

10. Composite cross (A04)

11. Composite cross (A05)

12. Composite cross (A08)

Plate III

13. Composite cross (A02)

Plate IV

14. Text (B02)

15. Text (B03)

16. Text (B04)

17. Text (B05)

18. Text (B06)

19. Text (B07)

20. Figure A10 (Orans)

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List of image captions

Figures

Fig. 1: Orthophoto of Berat Castle (2019)

Fig. 2: Map of known graffiti in the territory of Albania

Fig. 3: Floor Plan of the Church of the Holy Trinity

Fig. 4: The southern façade of the church

Fig. 5: Cross section of the church

Fig. 6: Crosses with deep carvings

Fig. 7: Crosses with scratches

Table

Plates (*have their own text***)**