CHAPTER 3

Graffiti in a House in Attica: Reading, Writing and the Creation of Private Space

Claire Taylor

Introduction

This chapter examines graffiti which appear inside a house in Attica in order to raise questions about writing, reading and the nature of private epigraphies. In investigating these inscriptions it is necessary to ask: what makes them private? On the face of it, the answer is simple: private might be thought of in terms of the location where the inscriptions were found, that is in a domestic context or relating to the household in some way. Alternatively private might be assessed in terms of production, that is, aligned with the concerns of the individual or the family as opposed to the state or other public body. In doing so, however, an implicit contrast is made with inscriptions in the public sphere: private is often considered distinct from political and unconnected with the official life of the community. However, we do not have to dig very deep to problematize this dichotomy and a gradation of public and private which pays close attention to context and nuances the social, political and economic factors which change over time seems more appropriate than a strict binary division.1

Although public and private are more slippery categories than at first seems to be the case, examining the type, location and quantity of writing defined in this way is useful not because it is constrained by this terminology, but because it highlights the flexibility of it, prompting questions about accessibility, visibility, power and privacy. This is demonstrated well by considering the idea of private space as seen in recent work on housing. Within ancient houses there were differing levels of “privacy,” which could be controlled by architecture, lines of sight, the placing of furniture or other moveable objects, the types of

* I am grateful to John Ellis Jones for reading a draft of this paper and making a number of suggestions which have saved me from errors. All mistakes are my own.

activities which were occurring, or the presence or absence of daylight. A key conclusion of research on housing since the 1990s is that space is not binary nor is it static: teasing out the differing uses of space and how it was manipulated to negotiate privacy, accessibility and power has been a key component of understanding ancient buildings and their inhabitants.

In a similar vein “public” and “private” epigraphies can be analyzed, and this requires questions to be posed about the location of an inscription, the manner of its production and the audience who viewed it. By way of illustration, consider a grave marker. Is it a “private” monument because it was erected by a family rather than by a public body? Is it “public” because it vies for the attention of those outside the household, competing with other monuments to be noticed? What if it was set up not in a cemetery or along a busy road, but on the rural property of the deceased where it might be seen by only a limited numbers of passers-by? What about a curse tablet deposited into the grave after the funeral? Does its lack of visibility make it more private, or are its concerns with social control a public matter for the community at large?

Understanding the nature of “public” and “private” epigraphies, therefore, draws on questions about agency, monumentality, display, commemoration, competition and performance. It is the intersections with these key components of epigraphic interpretation which provide the tools not only to observe writing in different spatial contexts but to nuance analysis of what public and private mean within them.

My aim here, then, is twofold. First I wish to discuss some inscriptions from Attica in order to contribute to the debate about graffiti inside buildings. Writing which appears inside structures is a widespread phenomenon in the ancient world—as this volume shows. It provides evidence not simply about how a building was used, but also demonstrates, through the processes of reading and writing, an active and dynamic engagement with the structures themselves and one which can be assessed in addition to the architectural forms or building layout. Although there are fewer examples of writing inside buildings in Attica than in other parts of the Graeco-Roman world (for very specific archaeological reasons discussed below), this chapter adds to the growing volume of evidence which suggests that this phenomenon should be considered not as a marginal, or marginalized, activity but as a significant part of the

---

3 On curse tablets see Eidinow 2007.
4 On reading and writing as separate but linked processes see Milnor 2009, 288–319. See also Harris 2000.