

Sacred Grooves in Ancient Egypt

Julia Troche, Ph.D., JuliaTroche@MissouriState.edu

Assistant Professor of History, Missouri State University



Missouri State
UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Sacred grooves, also known as “pilgrim” or “temple” grooves, are intentional, long gouges, typically found along the walls of sacred buildings or monuments, known not just from Egypt, but around the world. The grooves are evidence of prolonged, secondary engagement by visitors. The Egyptian grooves at Karnak Temple date as early as the New Kingdom (c. 1500 BCE), and persisted through antiquity, continuing possibly until the recent past. The grooves remain enigmatic—their proposed functions range from the mundane, such as a way to make game pieces, to the sacred (Traunecker 1987; Kristensen 2015). There are easily 10,000 grooves upon the monuments in Thebes alone, making a comprehensive study nearly impossible. Instead, this study investigates the grooves found upon the modestly sized Temple of Ptah at Karnak in order to assess the grooves’ spatial distribution and relationship to primary and secondary decoration, in an effort to better understand their utility. I am also seeking references to potentially productive cross-cultural parallels from antiquity.

Kristensen, Troels Myrup. 2015. “Pilgrimage, devotional practices and the consumption of sacred places in ancient Egypt and contemporary Syria.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21 no. 4: 354-368.

Traunecker, Claude. 1987. “Una pratica di magia popolare nei templi di Karnak.” In *La Magia in Egitto ai Templi del Nuovo Regno*. Ant convegno internazionale di studi. Milano 29-31 Ottobre 1985. Edited by Alessandro Roccati, Alberto Siloini. 221-242. Milan: Rassegna Internazionale di Ciriomatografia Archeologica, Arte e Natura Libri.

DEFINING THE DATASET



Figure 1: Sacred grooves nearby the Temple of Ptah at Karnak

Minimum Dimensions* + (Range Averages)

- *In an attempt to distinguish between accidental marks & intentional interventions
 - 0.1 cm depth (0.7-1.4cm)
 - 1cm width, being the shortest axis (3.7-5cm)
 - 4cm length, being the longest axis (11.8-20.4cm)
- Dataset Size**
- 287 grooves observed, mostly in clusters
 - Average height = 1.51m above ground level

OBSERVATIONS

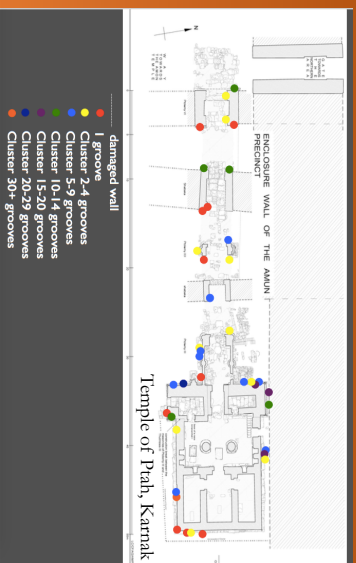


Figure 2: Spatial distribution of sacred grooves

- Grooves cluster together and show evidence of multiple levels of activity (e.g. layers of plaster or graffiti atop or under the grooves, or grooves overlapping) evincing repeated ‘growing’ episodes.
- Grooves are found exclusively on the exterior of the temple—meaning, no interventions in the temple’s most sacred spaces.
- Some grooves can be securely dated as early as the New Kingdom.
- Grooves are in dialogue with, but do not destroy, primary or secondary inscriptions (see Figure 3).
- Over 100 graffiti are also known at the Ptah Temple. Their high quality, size, and the later enshrinement of some particularly fine scenes, suggest that graffiti were not condoned or considered sacrilegious.

CONCLUSIONS



Figure 3: Grooves interacting with a graffiti on the north facade of the main building, Temple of Ptah

- Just as graffiti was not seen as a destructive act, these grooves should be considered alongside the other graffiti at the temple, which are understood to be expressions of piety. The practitioners’ respect of the primary and secondary decoration suggests growing activities occurred while the temple’s sacredness was still prominent within social memory.
- Ethnographic interviews suggest the grooves may have been formed by people collecting temple dust, which was ingested medicinally.
- The grooves were the result of multiple activity phases and may have various functions; however, I assert that one of these functions was for the ancient Egyptians to access the religious charge of the temple for pious expression and/or perceived apotropaic and medicinal effects.

THE TEMPLE OF PTAH

Located on the northern edge of the Karnak Temple precinct, the main sandstone building of the Ptah Temple dates to the reigns of Hatshepsut & Thutmose III (Dynasty 18). Five gateways (pylons) in front of the temple were later added by Shabaka and Ptolemy III, VI, and XII. The epigraphic study of the graffiti and secondary inscriptions is being conducted by the CFEETK, under the directorship of Elizabeth Froid and Christophe Thiers, utilizing the archive of Claude Traunecker.