

Writings in nowhere: Migrant graffiti on the borderland between Greece and Albania

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ABSTRACT:

Undocumented and forced migration from West Asia, Central Asia, and Africa to Europe reached unprecedented levels in the summer and fall of 2015. By the end of that year, more than 850,000 people had crossed the land and maritime borders between Turkey and Greece. Looking back at these events, iconic images of dramatic arrivals in rubber dinghies on the shores of the Aegean islands and refugee treks heading north to Central Europe come to mind. Since then, many journalists and photographers have shifted their attention from the humanitarian calamity in the Mediterranean to calamities elsewhere. Nevertheless, flight and migration to Europe continue until the present day, albeit off the grid and less noticed by the public.

People on the move produce material traces that reflect their living conditions at distinct stages of their contingent migratory journeys. These material remains document not only how they encounter the perils and obstacles during their unnoticed travels, such as, unpredictable forces of nature in the wilderness and border security infrastructure, but also reveal how people on the move attempt to leave a mark in the unfamiliar, often hostile environments they face during their clandestine routes to destination countries. One of the ways to communicate their existence and to enter into dialogue with other undocumented travelers is by inscribing on the walls of the buildings where they temporarily live or pass by. These textual and figural graffiti are often created without any prior planning and by using whatever comes to hand. As such, the inscriptions represent spontaneous expressions of individuals connected through similar experiences in the transitional space of the borderlands.

Based on an archaeological case study conducted in the Greek borderland in the summer of 2022, this paper discusses, on the one hand, the material culture left behind by migrants who moved on from Greece to Albania in the period from 2020 to 2022. On the other hand, it addresses the textual and figural graffiti they inscribed on the walls of two unexpected places in the liminal area of the Greek borderland; a highway underpass (Fig. 1) and an abandoned chapel. The correlation of the material traces with inscribed graffiti provides insights into the material circumstances from which the scribbles emerged in this specific context. Moreover, by focusing on the content of the graffiti written in different languages and scripts, we attempt to demonstrate how the investigation of migrant graffiti can contribute to a better understanding of the hidden stages of the social process called migration.



Figure 1. The north wall of a highway underpass is covered with migrant graffiti (above). Writing utensils made from a plastic card and a burnt wooden stick (left). Detail of graffiti on the north wall (right).