

Talk | Digital Humanities

THE WALL AS INTERFACE

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Engraved crosses and Armenian inscriptions, Chapel of Saint Helena, Jerusalem. D. Altaratz

THE CLAIM

A wall is not a static surface.

It is a layered archive of human behaviour, particular to one place.

And it is an interface: it decides what a body may do to it, under whose authority, and what survives.



I document surfaces to connect with
the generations of people who used a
space before me.

Photographer by training.

Communications researcher by discipline.

Stepwell, Gujarat. D. Altaratz, 2023



Computational surrogate

not a digital twin

A twin claims equivalence. A surrogate stands in for something and inherits what that something carried: social and cultural value, and a set of moral claims about what was recorded, what was left out, and who decided.

A photograph documents a wall. A surrogate substitutes for it, and for what it meant.

Technological uncanniness

familiar, and never the same

The surrogate feels familiar. You enter it, move through it, read it. And it still cannot replace the original, because the person inside it knows that it is not the original.

No affordance closes that gap. The difference is moral, not technical.

THREE PLACES, ONE QUESTION

Who sets the rules of the surface?



Chapel of Saint Helena, Jerusalem

JERUSALEM

Divided custody between churches



Apostolos Andreas, Cyprus

CYPRUS

A ceasefire line



Dada Harir Stepwell, Ahmedabad

GUJARAT

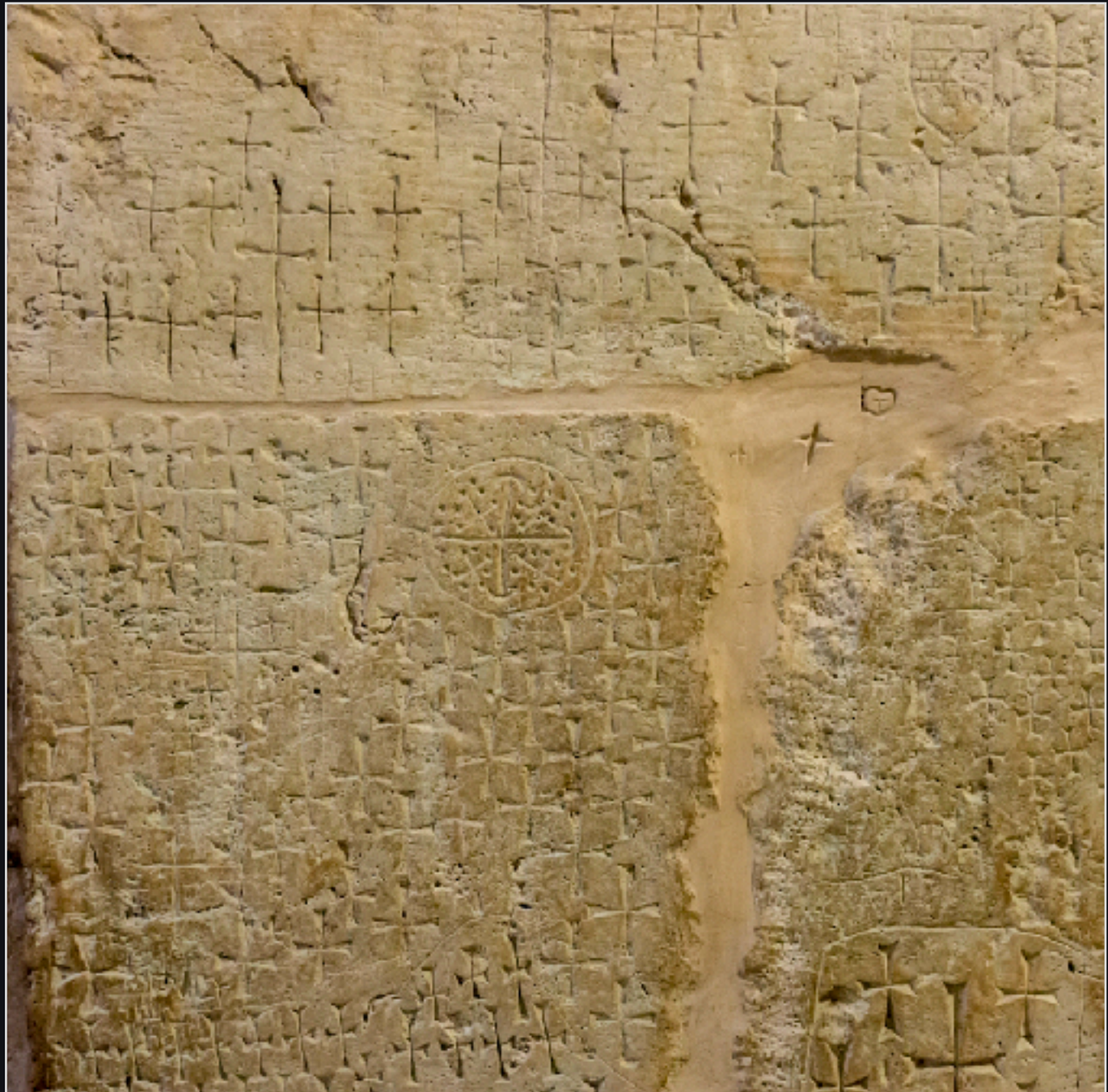
Almost nothing at all

CASE 1

Chapel of Saint Helena
Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem

Who cut these, when,
and why?

Stairway wall of crosses. Caine, Altaratz, Re'em and MacDonald, 2018



The image shows the interior of the Chapel of Saint Helena within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The architecture is characterized by a series of large, light-colored stone arches that create a sense of depth and height. A large, ornate chandelier with multiple tiers of glass and metal hangs from the ceiling, casting a warm glow. The walls are made of rough-hewn stone, and the floor is dark. The overall atmosphere is one of historical significance and architectural grandeur.

An underground chapel with five stacked periods and more than a thousand crosses carved into its walls.

Chapel of Saint Helena, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem. Caine, Altaratz, Re'em and MacDonald, 2018

WHAT EVERYONE KNEW

For a century: Crusader graffiti.

Three readings of what the carving was for

1

Marks of pilgrimage

Traces left by people who completed the journey.

2

Assertions of triumph

Latin domination written onto the holy places.

3

A by-product of the relic trade

The dust from the carving was the commodity. The mark was the waste.

Not Crusaders.

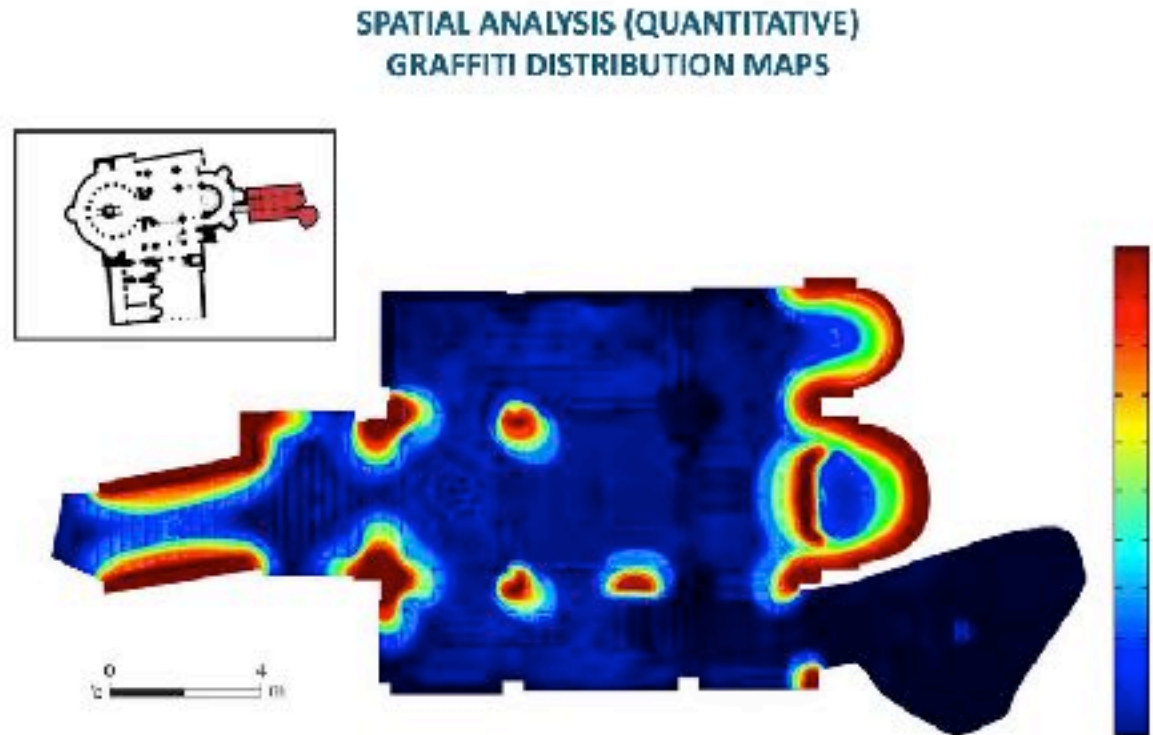
We got there by reading position, not form.

Not before the fourteenth century. Most likely the sixteenth to seventeenth. An organised practice under the Armenian clergy, about four hundred years later than the standard account.



Flattened apse surface, photogrammetric model, Chapel of Saint Helena

WHERE PEOPLE CHOSE TO CUT



CREDIT5: Andrea Tinazzo [@digitalalchemystudio](#)

The crosses cluster where the community had agreed the space mattered most.

A spontaneous practice does not produce this pattern.

Sacred influence and graffiti distribution maps overlaid, Chapel of Saint Helena. Trentin, Tinazzo and Altaratz

WHY THE WALLS FILLED AT ALL

UNDER CRUSADER RULE

One master, with state power behind him.

AFTER THE RECONQUEST

Several communities, one building, and an income to protect.

Felix Fabri, 1483

Pilgrims arrive with chisels, mallets and pasted paper drawings of their arms. He calls it a madness, close to idolatry.

William Wey, mid 1400s

Records the Franciscan rule for pilgrims: on no account are they to inscribe their coats of arms into the walls.

Hans Tucher, 1479 to 1480

Tells his readers to prepare a paper pattern of the family crest at home, ready to be cut into the wall.

Forbidden, published as a how to, and quietly lived off.

*Sources in Altaratz, Re'em and Caine
2022*

CASE 2

Apostolos Andreas Monastery
Cyprus

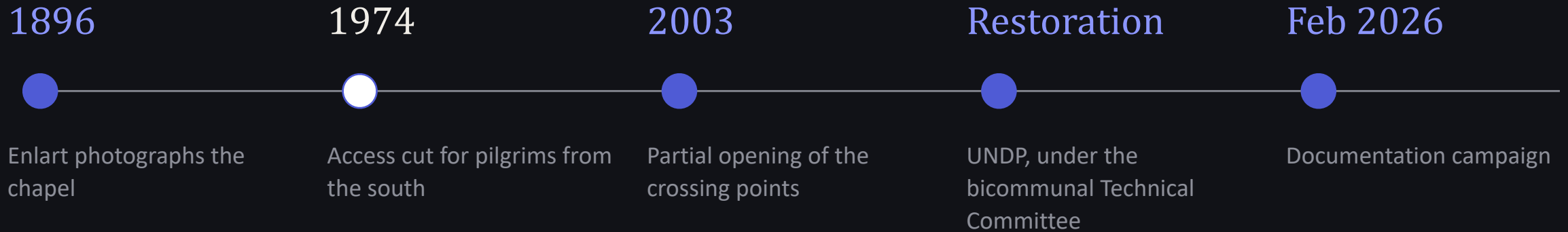
What was written
here, and why did it
disappear?

Interior of the medieval chapel. Trentin, Altaratz and Nicolaou, 2026



THE SITE

A pilgrimage site venerated by Christian and Muslim islanders alike.



Paid for jointly by the Church of Cyprus and the Evkaf Administration: the first heritage project on the island funded by both communities together.

WHAT MAKES THIS HARD

A divided island, where much of each community's heritage sits in the other community's territory.

Access

The chapel lies beyond a crossing point. Who may visit, and when, depends on political conditions rather than on opening hours.

Custody

The restoration moves only through the bicomunal Technical Committee. Nothing happens unless both communities agree to it.

Evidence

One photograph from 1896, and then almost nothing until 2026. The record of what was there is thinner than the wall itself.

Condition

Salt, moisture and plaster loss are taking the writing away faster than anyone can read it.



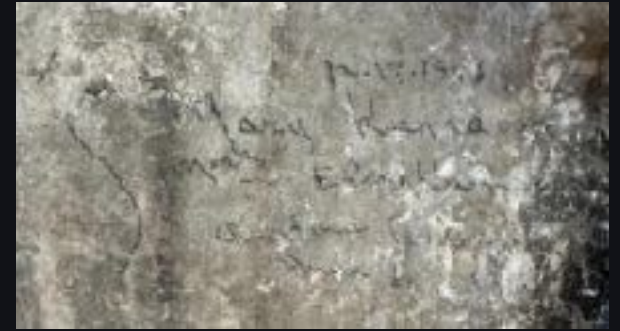
South wall and doorway, with recorded inscriptions marked. 2026

EVERY TIME THE WALL WAS CLOSED, PEOPLE OPENED IT AGAIN

LAYER 3

Ink

The 1950s and 60s. Initials traced by fingers in plaster still soft.



LAYER 2

Pencil

New plaster covers everything. Written on almost at once.



LAYER 1

Black pigment

Dense, up to three metres high. Already there in 1896.



THE SAME VIEW, 130 YEARS APART



Camille Enlart, 1896. Reproduced in Enlart, L'art gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre



The same view, February 2026. Trentin, Altaratz and Nicolaou

WHO WROTE ON THESE WALLS



Mary, Elenitsa, Anna.

Three Greek names written in Latin letters, in one hand, with the date 1946. One woman wrote down the names of the women she came with.

The floor of the chapel was renewed that same year.

Inscription on the second plaster layer, dated 1946, after DStretch enhancement. Apostolos Andreas, 2026

AND THEN IT STOPS

Three plasters. Three generations. Then nothing.

The writing runs through Ottoman rule, through the British administration, through independence. The last dated hands are from the 1950s and 60s.

Not because the wall changed, but because the people who wrote on it could no longer come.



East wall, with recorded inscriptions marked. 2026

INVISIBLE TO THE EYE



Layer 1 inscription under natural light



The same inscription after DStretch enhancement

The surrogate is now the only surface through which this wall can be read.

Visualisation is not presenting the evidence here. It is producing it.

INSIDE A SURROGATE



A church you can walk through, and never touch.

The Spirit of the Cloud, 2020: communities who rebuilt their homelands inside Jerusalem, recorded as point clouds with the sound of prayer.

Decimated point cloud of a church interior. Caine, Altaratz, Mann and Havkin, The Spirit of the Cloud, 2020

CASE 3

Stepwells and mosques
Gujarat and Rajasthan, India

Who owns the
surrogate, and where
is the community in it?



Stepwell, Gujarat. D. Altaratz, 2023

A DIFFERENT REGISTER

Architecture you enter by going down, recorded on a phone.

Subterranean water infrastructure built around bodily descent and the seasonal water level, its walls carrying Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic inscriptions. Adalaj, Dada Harir, Rani ki Vav, Sarkhej Roza, the Jami Masjid.

Consumer LiDAR, 2023, with Anant University, Ahmedabad.
Published openly.



Rani ki Vav, the Queen's Stepwell, Patan, Gujarat. D. Altaratz, 2023

WHO OWNS THE RECORD

JERUSALEM

Custody divided
between churches

CYPRUS

Two communities,
one committee

GUJARAT

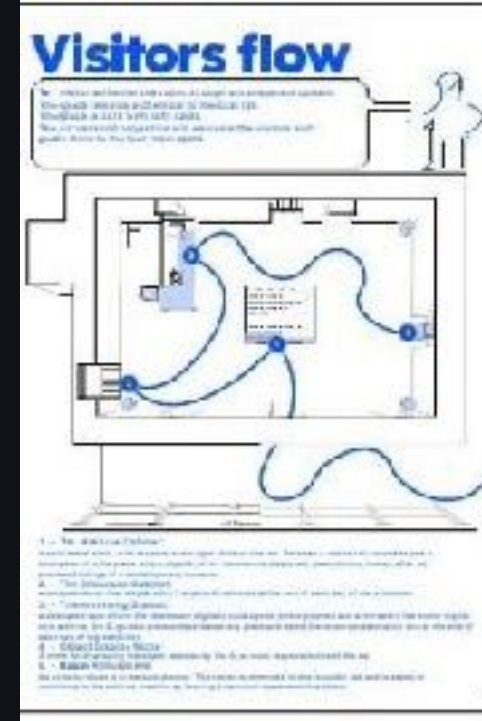
No owner at all

The instrument now costs almost nothing. What it leaves unsettled:

No permissions framework.

No paradata.

No agreement about who the record belongs to, or who may decide its future.



A visitor leaves an object.

An archivist gives it a number.

It is photographed and described
in fifty words by an AI.

Each evening the AI chooses the
object that best defines humans.

Around 40,000 visitors

arkhive, Jerusalem Design Week 2024, Hansen House. Altaratz, Trentin and Tinazzo

Here I built the interface, set the rules, and handed the
reading to a machine.

With Mia Trentin and Andrea Tinazzo.

Every wall here was an interface whose rules were set by whoever controlled the building.

Who controls the model?

HERE, AND NEXT

I document surfaces to connect with the generations of people who used a space before me.

The same question is live in Portugal. I am already working on it with Rolando Volzone, on water structures and places of worship in Portugal and Israel, and I am at HERCULES in Évora on Friday.

I work at the intersection of media theory, heritage, fieldwork, project management and the creative industries, and I can carry a project across all of them rather than hand it between them.

If you are working somewhere whose surfaces nobody has read, and with a community that has a stake in them, come and talk to me.

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3D models

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The Jerusalem
Institute

heritage.jmc.ac.il