

WRATISLAW 1842: VISITOR'S GRAFFITO RDK 1601 IN THE RAMESSEUM

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ABSTRACT: In 1842, the Bohemian nobleman Josef Xaver Count Wratislaw von Mitrowitz carved a visitor's graffito on a column in the rear part of the Ramesseum. The graffito, numbered RDK 1601, gives the family name 'Wratislaw' and the year of the visit '1842' and relates to his visit to the funerary temple on 2 April 1842.

KEYWORDS: visitors' graffiti – Ramesseum – Wratislaw von Mitrowitz

Introduction

At all major pharaonic sites in Egypt, tourists may come across various secondary inscriptions, commonly known as 'visitors' graffiti', dating from ancient times to the recent times. These inscriptions were carved or written on the walls of ancient monuments in a wide range of languages and scripts – from ancient Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Coptic to Arabic and various modern languages spoken across the world. They reflect the gradual globalisation of travel and the development of tourism on the banks of the Nile.

Graffiti production spans centuries and continents, and it is no surprise that graffiti often share certain characteristics. Visitors' graffiti in Egypt – regardless of the period they belong to – are typically placed on prominent ancient monuments as markers of an individual's presence at a specific site. They serve as unique testimonies to human interaction with sacred architecture and places. These graffiti usually include a name and other personal details, and in some cases, the date of the visit and/or a brief comment on its purpose.

Older examples also served as models for later inscriptions. It is therefore not surprising that graffiti left by tourists from ancient Greece and Rome inspired modern Western travellers who came to Egypt – particularly following Napoleon's expedition – equipped with knowledge of classical languages and authors.

Throughout the 19th century, the land on the Nile witnessed a boom in tourism from Europe and, to a lesser extent, from North America. During this period, thousands of visitors felt the need to inscribe their names on monuments across Egypt (and Sudan). Surprisingly, only a few of them were subjects of the Habsburg empire, and even fewer were natives of the Czech Lands. Ignaz Palme (1807–1877) of Kamenický Šenov (Steinschönau in German) in Northern Bohemia, who in 1837 inscribed his name on the walls of the Great Temple of Amun in Karnak and at the Ramesseum in Western Thebes, serves as a notable example.

Not far from Palme's graffito at the Ramesseum, a visitor's graffito by Joseph Xaver Count Wratislaw von Mitrowitz (1810–1869), dating from 1842, was recently identified by the present author as part of reconstructing his travels through Egypt and Lower Nubia between 1841–1842.

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The graffito is located on one of the surviving columns in the hall of offerings of the Ramesseum, i.e. the funerary temple of Ramses II in Western Thebes.²

The graffito had been already recorded, even though incorrectly and without the reference to its protagonist, in the corpus of visitors' graffiti from the Ramesseum, that Roger O. De Keersmaecker (1931–2020) compiled in 2010.³ De Keersmaecker registered the graffito under the catalogue no. RDK⁴ 1601. He recorded the name as 'Wratislay', being confused by the final 'w' continuing into an underline. The year of the visit was placed between the name and the underline.⁵

The present contribution thus seeks to add a small piece to the growing mosaic of the corpus of travellers' graffiti, the foundations of which were laid by Roger O. de Keersmaecker in his monumental work.

Josef Wratislaw von Mitrowitz

Josef Xaver Wratislaw von Mitrowitz (1818–1869) [Fig. 1]⁶ was a notable but little-known figure in Czech history. He was born into the noble House of Counts Wratislaw von Mitrowitz, who claimed to be descendants of Wratislaus II, the first king of Bohemia (reigned between 1061–1085).

Between 1837–1841, Josef Wratislaw studied law at the university in Prague. After completing his studies, he set out for a journey to the Orient, notably Egypt and Lower Nubia in 1841–1842. He travelled together with a group of Bohemian and Moravian noblemen, including his distant relative, the natural scientist Friedrich (Bedřich Všemír) Count Berchtold (1781–1876) and Hugo Karel Eduard Prince and Count Salm-Reifferscheidt-Raitz (1803–1888) amongst others.

The visit to Egypt and Lower Nubia was a significant moment in his life. During the trip he embraced local customs, wore traditional clothing, and gained deep knowledge of the region. He allegedly became an expert in Arabic, as well as Ottoman Turkish, and later served as an interpreter for the Viennese court.

After his return from the journey, between 1843–1844, Josef Wratislaw worked in a district office in the Wienerwald. He co-owned the estates of Wotitz (Votice) and Janowitz (Vrchotovy Janovice) and, in 1867, was appointed Chief Kitchen Master (*Oberstküchenmeister* in German) of the Kingdom of Bohemia – a position traditionally held by members of his family.

Josef Wratislaw was a music enthusiast and highly regarded for his humane character. He was an honorary citizen of the city of Tábor and the town of Olbramowitz (Olbramovice). He also served as a curator, or more precisely a board member, of the Austrian Land Museum.

In 1868, Josef Wratislaw became a chair of the Wiener Bank, despite lacking any experience in finance. Due to failed speculations, he fell into deep debt and tragically took his own life on 9 October 1869. He died unmarried and childless. His estates were sold to cover the debts.

He was buried in the Church of St. Gall in Chotýšany, Central Bohemia.

² The visit to the Ramesseum and the photographic documentation took place on 9 March 2025. The present author was assisted by Veronika Karásková during the graffito's documentation.

³ De Keersmaecker 2010.

⁴ Numbering according to the series of publications by Roger De Keersmaecker (= RDK) titled *Travellers' Graffiti from Egypt and the Sudan*.

⁵ De Keersmaecker 2010, pp. 75–76.

⁶ *Bibliographisches Lexikon der Kaiserthums Österreich* 58, 1889, pp. 159–160 with further references; Onderka 2024, pp. 29, 22–55.



Fig. 1. Josef Kriehuber: Portrait of Josef Wratisslaw von Mitrowitz; National Heritage Institute, State Castle Buchlov.



Fig. 2. View on the Ramesseum from the northeast. (Photo: Pavel Onderka).



Fig. 3. Aerial view on the Ramesseum. (Photo: Pavel Onderka).

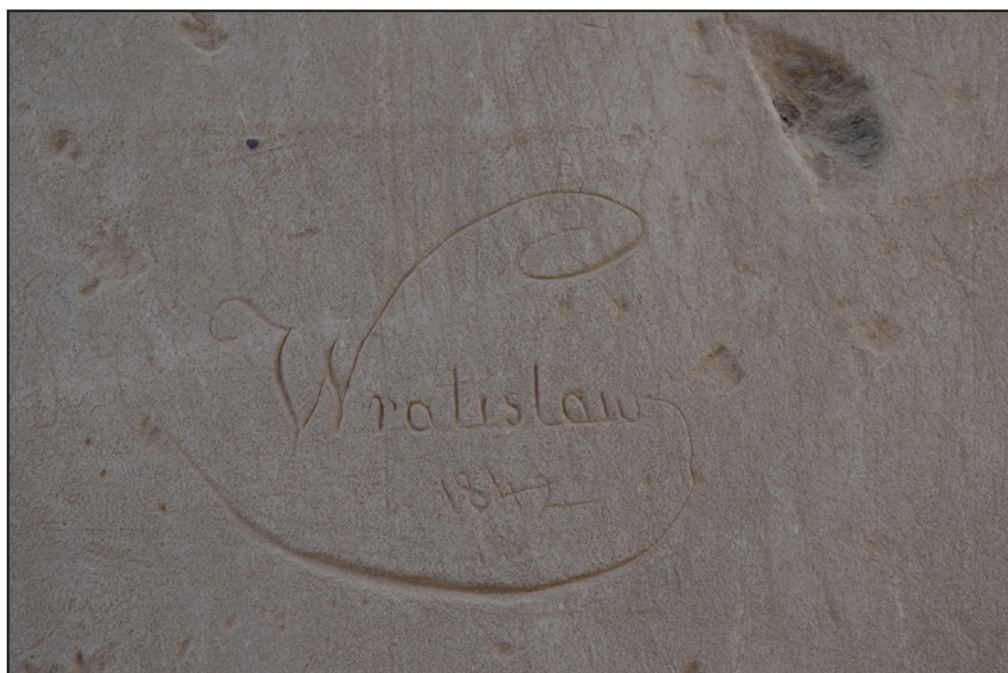


Fig. 4. Visitor's Graffito RDK 1601. (Photo: Pavel Onderka).

The Nile Cruise

Josef Wratislaw produced an account of his travels through Egypt and Nubia, which was not meant to serve anybody but himself. The hitherto only partly published diary was written in German and was titled *Nilfahrt* (The Nile Cruise). The manuscript is currently kept in the Moravian Land Archive in Brno, as part of the archival materials of the House of Counts von Berchtold, formerly known as 'Burgarchiv Buchlau'.⁷

The travelogue captures the journey the noble company took from Cairo to Wadi Halfa and back between 9 February and 14 April 1842. While initial parts of the manuscript likely represent notes taken during the cruise, the Nubian section and the return journey down the Nile to Cairo seem to have been written down only retrospectively, based on memories, notes of some sort, and contemporary Egyptological literature.

The first and longest section details the 23-day journey from Cairo to Aswan (9 February – 4 March 1842; pp. 3R–28L). The second section (5–31 March 1842; pp. 28R–54L) covers the visit to Lower Nubia and is written in an increasingly denser and more compact handwriting, implying the author's concentrated work, probably at his desk at home, using the latest Egyptological literature. The third section (1–14 April 1842; pp. 54R–67L) describes the return journey, with a large portion dedicated to the monuments of ancient Thebes (1–3 April; pp. 54R–56L), including the Luxor and Karnak temples, royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, as well as the

⁷ Moravian Provincial Archive, Berchtold Family Archive G 138, Inv. No. 854, Carton No. 231.

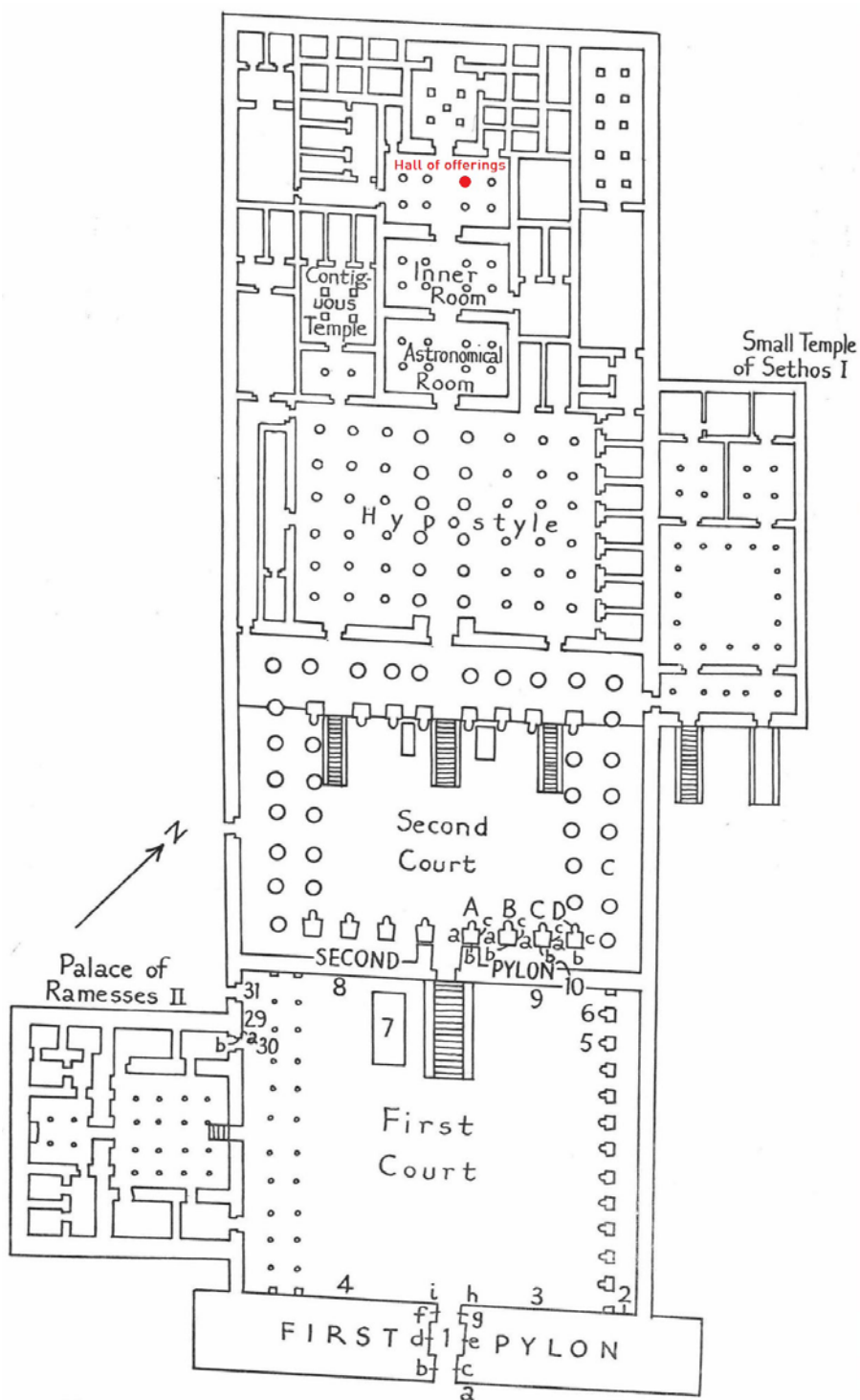


Fig. 5. Plan of the Ramesseum; Porter and Moss 1972, Pls. XLI-XLII.



Fig. 6. Northern group of columns in the hall of offerings of the Ramesseum. (Photo: Pavel Onderka).

royal funerary temples in Western Thebes, including the funerary temple of Ramses II (reigned between 1279–1213 BCE), generally known as the Ramesseum.⁸

Visit to the Ramesseum

Josef Wratislaw's visit to the Ramesseum [Figs. 2–3] took place on 2 April 1842. In the diary, it is recorded only briefly: '[Am 2ten April] [R]itten wir nach Med[i]ne[t]-Habu, durch das Rameseyon [!].⁹ Ich zeichente mehrere Gottheiten u[nd] bewunderte noch die Wandskulpturen[.]'¹⁰ Besides doing the drawings, Josef Wratislaw carved his family name and the year of his visit [Fig. 4] on the last column still standing at the Ramesseum's western side [Figs. 5–6]. It is the southwestern column amongst the four north of the temple's main axis in the temple's hall of offerings.¹¹ The graffiti faces southeast and is carved at the height of circa 2.5 m above the original floor of the room, to the right bottom of the scene depicting Ramses II offering to gods. It is circa 13 cm high and circa 16 cm wide. The handwriting corresponds to that of the non-German words in Josef Wratislaw's manuscript [Fig. 7].

⁸ Porter and Moss 1972, pp. 431–433, Pl. XLI–XLII; Stadelmann 1984.

⁹ Misspelled original designation of the structure by Jean-François Champollion.

¹⁰ English translation: 'On 2 April, we rode to Medinet Habu, through the Ramesseum. I drew several deities and admired the wall sculptures.' (MS Wratislaw, *Nilfahrt*, p. 58R, see above).

¹¹ De Keersmaecker 2010, p. 15 – column No. 67; Porter and Moss 1972, Pl. XLII, Inner Room, column C.

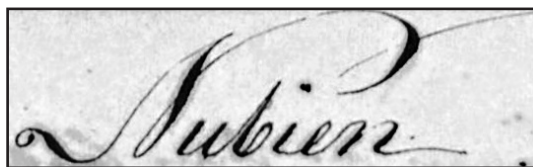


Fig. 7. Samples of text from the manuscript *Nilfahrt*; Moravian Provincial Archive, Berchtold Family Archive G 138, Inv. No. 854, Carton No. 231.

The name and the underline are carved deep into the sandstone; the letters forming the name are oriented upright. The digits giving the dating are carved shallower and slightly tilt forward. The dating seems to be an addition to the original design of the artistically executed name. The addition of the date might have been inspired by other visitors' graffiti in the Ramesseum or elsewhere, as most of the graffiti consists of name(s) and date(s). With respect to his artistic qualities and capabilities, one can assume that Josef Wratislaw carved the graffiti on the column himself. No similar graffiti were discovered in this part of the temple. Five more graffiti in the Ramesseum, dated similarly to 1842,¹² do not display any evident shared characteristics.

Conclusion

Visitor's Graffito RDK 1601 in the Ramesseum, Western Thebes, may be, based on its dating and handwriting, ascribed to Josef Xaver Count Wratislaw von Mitrowitz, who travelled through Egypt and Lower Nubia between 1841–1842. It is the only hitherto identified visitor's graffiti the traveller left behind. Based on the information provided by his diary, dating of the graffiti's creation may be firmly and exactly dated on 2 April 1842.

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¹² De Keersmaecker 2010, Cat. Nos. RDK 641, 1416, 1463, 1539, 1592.