

TEXTS WITHIN THE MATERIAL WORLD

*Assemblages, Contexts, Networks
in Ancient Societies from Africa to Asia*



International Conference

organised by:

Marilina Betrò, Jesper Eidem, Michael Friedrich, Cécile Michel, Gianluca Miniaci

1-3 December 2021, Pisa

Centro Congressi Le Benedettine (Piazza S. Paolo a Ripa D'Arno, 16, Pisa)

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TEXTS WITHIN THE MATERIAL WORLD

Assemblages, Contexts, Networks in Ancient Societies from Africa to Asia

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
PISA, 1–3 December 2021

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Organised by:

Marilina Betrò, Jesper Eidem, Michael Friedrich, Cécile Michel, Gianluca Miniaci
Department of Excellence Civiltà e Forme del Sapere – Università di Pisa,
Universität Hamburg, Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures

Recent decades have seen growing interest in the materiality of ancient texts beyond their basic message (see the [study day](#) held in Pisa on 11th December 2017). The aim of the Conference is to reconsider ancient texts in their archaeological context or in the landscape to which they once belonged, in order to understand the intimate relationships between written and unwritten artefacts of a single assemblage/context, and how these may have influenced each other.

In this scenario, the conference will gather experts on ancient Egypt, Near East, Eastern Mediterranean, India, and China to present and share the complex nature and interactions of written artefacts, with the aim of making possible a very strong comparative perspective.

The Conference will be held in presence, with a limited number of places, but it will be made freely available online on the Microsoft Teams platform (interactive discussion between speakers and online attendees is made possible and welcome). Any participants must register by the 20 November 2021 at the following site: <https://bit.ly/3IJexRY>.

The participation is free of charge but registration is mandatory. The virtual classroom link will be sent by mail to the registered attendees after the 20 November.



PROGRAMME

Wednesday 1 December

17.00-17.30 - Welcome address by Pisa University and Director of Dept. of Civiltà e Forme del Sapere

17.30-18.00 - Introduction (Marilina Betrò, Cécile Michel)

18.00-18.45 - John Baines (Oxford): *Material and spatial contexts of early writing: Egypt and a comparison with late second millennium BCE China*

18.45-19.30 - Questions and discussion

Thursday 2 December

9.30-10.00 - Susanne Töpfer (Museo Egizio): *Beyond Philology – What material features and scribal practice can tell about use and function of texts*

10.00-10.15 - Questions and discussion

10.15-10.45: Ondřej Škrabal (Hamburg): *For Spirits' Eyes Only? The Epigraphic Landscape of Ancient Chinese Ancestral Temples*

10.45-11.00 - Questions and discussion

11.00-11.30 - Coffee break

11.30-12.00 - Ludwig Morenz (Bonn): *Can the subaltern ... write? (Re-/De-)Constructing a palaeo-postcolonial discourses with a special focus on the invention of alphabetic writing*

12.00-12.15 - Questions and discussion

12.15-12.45 - Ingo Strauch (Lausanne): *Who wrote what in Ancient India and where and why*

12.45-13.00 - Questions and discussion

13.00-15.00 - Lunch break

15.00-15.30 - Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum (Berlin): *„Open the tablet box and read!“ Textual artefacts and the creation of temporal communities*

15.30-15.45 - Questions and discussion

15.45-16.15 - Philippe Clancier (Paris): *“Get your notebooks!” Teaching material in context in late Uruk private houses*

16.15-16.30 - Questions and discussion

16.30-17.00 - Stefano De Martino (Turin), Michele Cammarosano (Naples): *The Tablet as Object: Hittite and Hurrian Texts*

17.00-17.15 - Questions and discussion



Friday 3 December

09.00- 09.30 - Jorrit Kelder (Oxford/Leiden): *Text Matters. Epigraphy, archaeology, and our understanding of the Mycenaean world*

09.30-09.45 - Questions and discussion

9.45-10.15 - Jesper Eidem (Pisa), Cécile Michel (Paris): *Some Mesopotamian Challenges*

10.15-10.30 - Questions and discussion

10.30-11.00 - *Coffee break*

11.00-11.30 - Andreas Stauder (Paris): *Inscriptions in contact: early New Kingdom Qurnah*

11.30-11.45 - Questions and discussion

11.45-12.00 - Gianluca Miniaci (Pisa): *Mutilating written signs: how the materiality of text affected the forms of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (2600-1500 BC)*

12.00-12.15 - Questions and discussion

12.15-13.15 - Final discussion (Michael Friedrich)





ABSTRACTS

John Baines

Material and spatial contexts of early writing: Egypt and a comparison with late second millennium BCE China

Most early writing was the preserve of tiny elites within the societies where it emerged. Almost by definition, the very first written forms of most traditions have not been found, whereas a little of their material and physical settings can be reconstructed, so long as one bears gaps in evidence constantly in mind. The forms of writing should be related to those settings. The writing was generally small-scale, and little of it appears to have been used in exterior locations. Its living and supernatural audiences were also small. At the beginning it was almost certainly not focused on notating language. The elite visual culture of relevant periods was diverse and adapted to the media used. The earliest writing partook in that diversity. The practice could be realized in more than one mode, for example pictorial versus cursive or semi-abstract. Modern implicit assumptions that systems should be unitary may be out of place, and they go against the patterns found in many traditions. This paper will relate these and other partly hypothetical points of departure to the analysis of early Egyptian writing (late 4th millennium bce), comparing results with new thinking about the earliest Chinese writing.

Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum

„Open the tablet box and read!“ Textual artefacts and the creation of temporal communities

In the digital cosmos of the present day, networking is the central instance; the world-wide-web is a decisive factor in this new form of social interaction. It is a world of links and hyperlinks, of algorithms, aggregators, recommendations, a huge, constantly growing archive of content that is manipulated not only by monopolies and oligopolies but also by its own dynamics. This infrastructure also has a material side, of course: not so much in the Internet of Things, but rather in the form of energy: physical energy, which is needed to generate the network - and social energy, people who use and operate it. What do we see when we look back from this present to pre-digital societies, to societies that began to develop forms of symbolic thinking thousands of years ago?

This lecture would like to show, using examples from the written culture of ancient Mesopotamia, how in these societies networks were created through text artifacts. It will present the concept of textual neighborhoods and the role of material regimes. We will analyse some of the practices by which these temporal communities were and – in fact still are generated; we will discuss some methodological issues that arise when looking at the remains of such networks; and - last but not least - we will offer some insights to be gained from these ancient techniques of artifact-texture.



Philippe Clancier

“Get your notebooks!” Teaching material in context in late Uruk private houses

Exorcist-doctors of the late Babylonian period, from the 5th BC to the 1st AD, are among the best documented scholars of ancient Mesopotamian history. This documentation consists mainly of cuneiform tablets highlighting their skills, knowledge, and some of their practices both privately and in their work in local shrines. It is sometimes possible to go further and reconstruct the material and social context in which some of these exorcist-physicians lived.

German archaeologists have discovered two private houses in Uruk (Lower Mesopotamia) that belonged to masters of exorcism and medicine. They date from the late Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods. Two figures are particularly emblematic of these two houses: Anu-ikšur for the first and Iqīšaya for the second.

The excavations, which were carried out in these buildings in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought to light what can generically be called two "libraries" of literary and scholarly shelves, supplemented by a few archival documents of an economic and administrative nature.

The text alone, out of context, whether it is a completed work or an exercise, could not have provided so much information without its contextualization, which makes it possible to advance a few nuances or to address some themes such as:

- the "library" is in reality an empirically built up collection reflecting the teaching and learning activities of exorcism, medicine and divination in Anu-ikšur and Iqīšaya houses. One can legitimately wonder about the will to gather a reference collection;
 - the most beautiful tablets were intended to be placed in the local sanctuaries and most of the high level exercises of the students or the teaching supports of the masters were kept in these houses;
 - the physical data of the two houses give an idea of how the tablets were stored and arranged;
 - these can be related to objects such as kalam, a oven or muddy clay ready to be shaped into a tablet etc.
 - the place where the exorcism was performed was the sanctuary, for which the members of these houses worked. What was the place of practice of medicine?
 - All these elements draw the daily life of master exorcist-physicians, teaching at home to highly advanced students. The structure of certain texts raises the question of the mode of learning, particularly through orality. But what is missing can also say a lot about technical knowledge that did not pass through the written word.
- We will try to present this rather remarkable case study as much through the tablets that have come down to us as by looking at the material and daily context in which they were discovered and by trying to address some of the personal uses of the owners of these houses.

Stefano De Martino, Michele Cammarosano

The Tablet as Object: Hittite and Hurrian Texts

Cuneiform tablets are increasingly studied not only in function of their content but also as material objects, thus with a focus on aspects like manufacturing and chemical properties as well as shape, layout, and dimensions. Also, quantitative approaches to the study of cuneiform palaeography are increasingly used, both in terms of systematic analyses of specific palaeographical traits across large corpora and of metrological investigations of the script itself. Computer-aided techniques emerge as a powerful tool for improving documentation and accessibility of cuneiform collections around the world as well as for making effective quantitative analyses of the tablets possible. The paper aims to discuss current approaches to the computer-aided documentation and analysis of cuneiform tablets by means of a critical appraisal of selected case-studies, with a focus on Hittite and Hurrian corpora.

Jesper Eidem, Cécile Michel

Some Mesopotamian Challenges

The hundreds of thousands of cuneiform clay tablets discovered in the Near East cover more than three millennia and a vast region stretching from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, from Egypt to the Black Sea. Despite their abundance, they are very unevenly distributed in time and space and provide only flashes of information, thus representing a real challenge for scholars who try to understand ancient societies. In this paper we explore concrete examples of this situation drawn from sites in Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia in the early 2nd Mill. BC.



Jorrit Kelder

Text Matters. Epigraphy, archaeology, and our understanding of the Mycenaean world

There can be no doubt that texts, both ancient and modern, are shaped by their social, political and material context. Understanding that context, therefore, allows us to better understand the texts. But what if the original context of a given text is lost, or only partially preserved? And what if the context is preserved, but the text itself has gone? By analysing various discussions in Aegean prehistory and Hittitology, this paper highlights various methodological pitfalls that are associated with answering such questions. It aims to demonstrate how the emergence of ‘factoids’ in the scholarly discourse of one discipline can result in the misinterpretation of data in another (related) field.

Gianluca Miniaci

Mutilating written signs: how the materiality of text affected the forms of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (2600-1500 BC)

For over a millennium, from 2600 BC to 1550 BC, Egyptian hieroglyphs were occasionally altered by the voluntary amendment of some graphemes, through their deformation, their mutilation, and the erasure of some of their components. For instance, the sign f, representing a horned viper, could be either deprived of a part of its body (such as the tail or the head), or have the head detached from the body, or have a knife inserted into its neck. The removal of the legs or of the lower part of animal or human figures is a strategy already adopted in other contemporary – though conceptually different – contexts in Egypt, such as faience figurines representing animals and other beings. Such a practice seems to be mainly related to the funerary sphere: dangerous signs and beings are those in closest contact with the deceased. Scholars have sought the explanation of this practice in religious and magic purposes but have rarely explored the role played by the materiality of the carrier and its archaeological context.

Ludwig Morenz

Can the subaltern ... write? (Re-/De-)Constructing a palaeo-postcolonial discours with a special focus on the invention of alphabetic writing

Analysing the origin of alphabetic writing I focus on the fertility of cross-cultural contacts between Egyptians and Canaanites 4000 years ago. Contrary to expectation, this new way of writing was originally not just a logocentric evolution of simplicity but was also combined with conspicuous communication within the sphere of visual culture. Accordingly, we can detect various cultural elements characteristic for its place of origin: the mining area of Serabit el Khadim in SW-Sinai around 1900BC.

The genesis of alphabetic writing in the early second millennium BC can be considered the most successful and indeed the most significant media-development of the Near Eastern Middle Bronze Age. It eventually brought socio-cultural benefits highly relevant even today in our modern world: East and West, North and South. All our modern alphabetic writing systems depend on it, more or less directly.

Alphabetic writing originated in the cultural periphery of South-Western Sinai around 1900 BC. In the next step of cultural evolution, it was adopted by Levantine city states such as Lakhish around 1500 BC or possibly slightly earlier. In the early first millennium BC, the alphabetic tradition split into a Western branch via Greek and an Eastern branch via Aramaic.

What turned incredibly successful over a period of 4000 years and used today in all continents of the world might however have started simply as a distinctly provincial simplification of the complex Egyptian phono-semantic hieroglyphic writing system. In the cross-cultural *longue durée* and within a global perspective, this product of an evolution of simplicity (= Occams razor in social practice) turned out to be highly attractive for various users with very different cultural backgrounds. The detachment from its original socio-cultural context in SW-Sinai eventually turned alphabetic writing into more of a technical tool (and medium) for simply encoding language phonetically, but in my presentation I am going to focus on its original socio-cultural context and thus the combination of an evolution of simplicity with conspicuous communication.



Ondřej Škrabal

For Spirits' Eyes Only? The Epigraphic Landscape of Ancient Chinese Ancestral Temples

Bronze vessels and bells constituted the most prestigious among the ritual paraphernalia used by early Chinese aristocracy in sacrificial rituals, especially during the regular ancestral sacrifices. Many of these bronzes bore inscriptions, some of which were, however, obliterated by the sacrificial food and wine during the ritual. Some scholars thus believe that the inscriptions were addressed to the spirits and not to humans. Moreover, the bronzes are typically found in secondary contexts, such as tombs or hoards, and very little is thus known about their use, storage, and display during the sacrifices in the ancestral temple. This presentation first considers the epigraphic evidence from the Western Zhou period (1045–771 BCE) to argue that the inscriptions' audience included primarily the living participants of sacrifices, and then proceeds with the reconstruction of how the inscribed objects were displayed and stored, when and how they were read, what their status was vis-à-vis uninscribed ritual bronzes and what other objects co-created the epigraphic landscape of an ancient Chinese ancestral temple.

Andreas Stauder

Inscriptions in contact: early New Kingdom Qurnah

Egyptian inscriptions like to cluster in space. As an introduction, the paper will first illustrate, with Old and Middle Kingdom examples, how inscriptions are made in dialogue with previous inscriptions in a given place. Focusing on early New Kingdom Qurnah, it will then address aspects of the spatial context as a competitive theater of the elite, of the material presence of the texts in the chapels, and of relations of emulation between successive inscriptions in often neighboring spaces.

Ingo Strauch

Who wrote what in Ancient India and where and why

The emergence of script in ancient India has been a matter of dispute for a long time. While the pioneers of Indian Studies could not imagine a highly developed culture without the art of writing, the research by Oskar von Hinüber and Harry Falk put into question the early use of script. They both connected the invention of writing with the first great empire in Indian history, the Mauryan empire, and its foremost ruler, king Aśoka. According to this hypothesis, script was introduced on the Indian subcontinent in a royal context, so to say: from above.

This context also determined the use of writing. Following the model of the neighbouring Achaemenid empire, Aśoka commissioned the invention of writing in order to have put into writing his royal or private edicts. These edicts are found all over India, on the surfaces of rocks or pillars that have been erected in the neighbourhood of religious institutions.

In recent years, this theory has become challenged, mainly by archaeologists and historians who rely on radiocarbon dates for inscribed potsherds that seem to predate the Aśokan inscriptions. This new evidence would point to a completely different context of writing and consequently to a different direction of the spread and use of this art. In my paper, I will try to evaluate both theories and to discuss the present state of research.

Susanne Töpfer

Beyond Philology – What material features and scribal practice can tell about use and function of texts

The aim of the paper is to discuss the use and function of texts while taking into consideration not only the textual content but also the features of the writing and the material as support itself.

What can tell us the choice of recto or verso about the meaning and function of a text copy? How was a reused papyrus with heterogeneous texts actually used and stored? What do we learn about the 'biography of object' by studying the scribal practice and material features?

Those aspect should be discussed by presenting various papyrus scrolls with hieratic texts from the New Kingdom till the Roman period.

