❧ INTRODUCTION

VIEWING INSCRIPTIONS ☙

Antony Eastmond

WRITING AS ART

Inscriptions communicate. Whether they are royal proclamations, pious prayers, wise sayings, historical accounts or simple records of names, inscriptions were considered important by those who made and read them, and they have become crucial historical tools to modern historians. Yet, like all means of communication between humans, the information they contain is coded not just in the words that constitute the text but also in a wide variety of nonverbal forms.[1] In speaking, these nonverbal forms include the kinesic messages conveyed by gesture, posture, facial expression and movement. Inscriptions, whether inscribed on a monumental scale on the side of a mountain or carved in letters just millimetres high on an ivory casket, similarly rely on nonverbal elements – choices of script, scale, location, spatial organisation, letter style, clarity and legibility – for much of their meaning.

The chapters in this volume all address this nonverbal visual evidence, the *other* information embedded in inscriptions. They consider writing as art, not simply as an art form (the more traditional and well-established study of calligraphy, literally 'beautiful writing' from the Greek κάλλος and γραφή). Rather, they see inscriptions as important constituents of wider visual environments. All focus on inscriptions, whether painted, carved or formed from tiles and bricks: texts inscribed on the floors, walls and ceilings of buildings; chiselled on a monumental scale into the bare rock of cliff faces; or placed, barely visibly, on ivory boxes and glass lamps. They vary from royal proclamations, set up sometimes in three or four languages simultaneously and inscribed with great care and precision or with great effort in difficult-to-reach places, to graffiti hastily and illicitly

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scratched into walls. These words are not simply representations of disembodied utterances. Once created, they become physical objects whose materiality is an essential element in the means by which they convey meaning.

This volume deliberately brings together scholars who work on a broad range of periods and fields that stretch all the way around and across the Mediterranean, from Spain to the Caucasus on the north side, from Tunisia to Egypt and Syria on the south, and with Sicily at its heart. Beyond the Mediterranean, they look to the Iranian world, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The chapters concentrate on the late antique and medieval worlds, but they look back to the fifth century BCE and forward to the seventeenth century CE. In the Christian world they move from late antique Rome to Byzantine Greece and Georgia around the year 1000. They examine Sicily in the twelfth century, Spain in the thirteenth, and Italy and Armenia in the fourteenth century. In the Islamic world the chapters range across the Umayyad, Aghlabid, Fatimid, Seljuk, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal realms; in Chapter 1 Matthew Canepa traces Sasanian and early Islamic practices in Iran to the epigraphic cultures of earlier Persian societies, the Achaemenids and Seleucids. Despite this extraordinary diversity in period and place, all the chapters are united by their interest in the ways in which groups in societies exploited the presence of writing to convey additional meanings beyond their verbal content. The aim of this chronological and geographic breadth is to encourage conversations across modern disciplinary, regional and period boundaries in academia and to explore the common uses of writing, as well as the particular differences employed by different cultures at different times.

Inscriptions have tended to be treated as collections of words, whose materiality is incidental. Such assumptions underlie the origins of the great corpora of inscriptions, which were often motivated by positivist concerns about the factual content that could be gleaned by reading such texts. The *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (*RCEA*), the great eighteen-volume corpus of Arabic historical inscriptions, for example, is completely unillustrated and only provides modern transcriptions and translations of all its Arabic texts.[2] With no interest in the appearance of any text, it is impossible to glean any of the kinds of information that the chapters in this volume seek to exploit. Even those corpora that do include photographs tend to use them primarily as a means to corroborate the editors' reading of the text itself, rather than as a source of additional information.[3]

The essential premise of this book is that inscriptions are not just disembodied words that can be studied in isolation. Instead they must be considered as material entities, whose meaning is determined as much by their physical qualities as by their contents. None of the chapters seeks to deny the importance of reading inscriptions. Indeed the contents remain important and are central to understanding the ways in which they have been set up and used. However, in addition to their contents, the ways in which words were presented to onlookers is a key source of information and a generator of meaning that should not be ignored.

Meaning can be generated simply by the formal qualities of inscriptions: the shape and arrangement of the script used, the size of letters, the legibility and readability of the inscription. Scripts can deliberately look to the distant past, as with the use of ancient kufic in the fourteenth-century Sultan Hasan Complex in Cairo,[4] or the revival of Roman script in the façade inscription of Salerno cathedral in the eleventh century.[5] Equally, as Stefania Gerevini shows in Chapter 10, self-consciously modern scripts can be employed, even when trying to invent a long and venerable history. Meaning is further developed by the relationship between the texts and their physical contexts. The layout and sequencing of texts can affect how viewers interact with the buildings or landscapes in which they are located. The visual qualities of texts, the ways in which they wrap around buildings or cluster in particular places, can give them agency to encourage ritual or other interactions between readers/viewers and the texts or monuments.

As Chapter 1 shows, readability is a central feature of Achaemenid Persian inscriptions. Placed high on cliff faces, they could never have been read without some form of crib or accompanying oral performance. They were clearly meant only to be seen. Their illegibility and their permanence in the landscape made them expressions of power far more potent than their often banal contents would suggest. Similar arguments have been proposed for other inscriptions in other cultures that were also placed beyond the sight or reach of most viewers.[6] The apparent legibility of a text could be undercut in other ways. Inscriptions in Christian churches in Byzantium,[7] Syria[8] and Armenia[9] are all recorded as being written in clear, legible scripts, but the words are represented in cipher. These inscriptions thus present themselves as script, but can only be read by those initiated into the code. Equally, the monograms employed in many of the same churches clearly relate to writing, but the ways in which letters were combined meant that they were (and often remain) impossible to decode. The writing conveys meaning, but at the same time its presentation is deliberately unhelpful to the reader.[10]

The visual qualities of inscriptions allow them to play with their onlookers, who can be manipulated to act as the viewer of an inscription rather than its reader. Texts can be presented both to encourage and discourage reading, shifting emphasis between the textual content and the formal appearance of the inscription. These strategies of presentation dictate the ease and the speed of reading and can require onlookers to dedicate long periods of study in order to access their contents. They can both facilitate and obfuscate access to their contents and verbal meaning. The different strategies employed all help us better understand the reason the writing was put there in the first place.[11]

READING AND VIEWING

The question of who read inscriptions is an important one.[12] The ability to read is a multifaceted problem that concerns not just the literacy and education of the

reader but also many features of the text.[13] Is the inscription legible? Is it read-able? The first question concerns the form of the writing, the ways in which the letters are presented and how they fit into the text as a whole: are the individual letters distinct? Are individual words presented clearly, with or without abbrevi-ations and other *sigla*? How do the words form into sentences: in a linear form with word breaks or in a more complex order with words run together or awk-wardly split across lines? Readability is affected not only by these same issues but also by other matters such as the size of the lettering and its placement: can it actually be seen by the naked eye?

These points all affect the ways in which the text can be read. As Paul Saenger has noted, texts that do not leave spaces between words force their readers to approach them differently.[14] They require greater concentration and can only be read more slowly. This changes the readers' relationship both to the inscrip-tion and to the object or monument on which it is inscribed, because it now must be studied and considered over a longer period of time in order to read the text fully. Indeed we might wonder whether the words written on objects were always meant to be read and, if so, by whom. Did patrons expect that the texts that they commissioned to be placed on works of art would (or could) be read by everyone who saw them? How were the words perceived by illiterate viewers? In what ways might they have been seen when they are considered simply in terms of their visual appearance and effect, with no thought to their verbal meaning, when a formalist reading is applied to them? How do they function as ornament? The ability to exclude readers becomes a way of restricting access to their con-tents, which confers a new status on the text as a bearer of secret and therefore potentially more powerful meanings.[15]

For those inscriptions that cannot easily be seen, the question arises of the rela-tionship between the text and other means by which its meaning might be trans-mitted. How do the inscriptions relate to the spoken word, to oral recitations of the text from memory, or to other written versions kept elsewhere?[16] Does the inaccessibility of the text change its meaning? Were inscriptions, like Victorian children, to be seen but not heard? Or should we assume that there were altern-ative means to access these texts, in which case the inscription becomes merely a visual cue or mnemonic? The importance of memory in the premodern age and the repetitious training by which monks and mullahs (among others) learned the Bible or Qur'an by heart would allow words or phrases to cue such viewers to recite much longer passages.

When considering the relationship between the inscription and the reader, lit-eracy is clearly a central issue. However, literacy is not an absolute: it is a sliding scale that runs between full literacy – the ability to read, write and compose – and various forms of functional literacy.[17] Functional literacy can vary between signature literacy (the ability just to read and sign your name); differing degrees of ability to recognise particular letters, words or phrases; or the ability to read and write in one particular language.[18] Each person, therefore, brings a different

degree of knowledge and experience to bear on inscriptions and, as a result, will take different things from them. And the further we move down the scale of literacy the greater the importance of viewing over reading. The less you can read, the greater the shift from reading to viewing and the more the writing becomes a visual symbol rather than a means of verbal communication. In these instances the context of the inscription takes on more importance than the contents. But as some of the chapters in this volume show, artists could play on the blurred line between reading and viewing. Inscriptions can be placed in such obscure places or made on such a small scale that reading must be preceded by an act of intense, detailed viewing. Equally, multilingual inscriptions, as discussed by Tom Nickson (Chapter 8) and Matthew Canepa (Chapter 1), were rarely intended to be comprehensible to all: rather each community had access to different versions of the text, and meanings arose from the varying nature of the contents of each language's inscription – from the order and juxtaposition of the languages and from the ways in which the placement of the different texts could evoke notions of community or hierarchy and authority.

In other cases artists exploited the overlap between writing and ornament. In Chapter 7 Scott Redford discusses the different registers of writing and ornament in the Qaratay Madrasa in Konya, which are predicated on a literate viewer, but it is clear that not all the inscriptions are meant simply to be read. Inscriptions are disguised as ornament, and ornament is presented as inscription. The aesthetics of writing are very much to the fore here. A parallel case is presented by Ioanna Rapti in Chapter 9 of a fourteenth-century Armenian inscription in which the letters are barely distinguishable from the ornament that surrounds them. All require detailed scrutiny to distinguish one from the other. In Chapter 6 Jeremy Johns finds a more perplexing overlap of real and pseudo-writing in the twelfth-century Cappella Palatina in Palermo.

The Cappella Palatina inscriptions demonstrate also the importance of placement. This is also a central concern of Chapter 11, in which Sheila Blair considers the placement of craftsmen's signatures on a range of Islamic works of art that could be examined in the most intimate of circumstances. Here the location of the signature conveys more meaning than the words themselves, particularly about the relationship between the craftsman and the patron. It shows the playfulness of medieval writing.

INTERACTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS

In recent years the study of art and text has become the focus of increasing attention. Volumes devoted to 'Art and Text' have explored the relationship between words and images in Greek, Roman and Byzantine culture; analyses of writing and inscriptions have long been central to the study of Islamic art.[19] These studies consider not just the relationship of words to images but also the idea of text

as art.[20] This book does not seek to reproduce that work; rather it is interested in the legacy of those Greco-Roman epigraphic habits on the successor states around the Mediterranean and their impact on their neighbours in the larger Iranian world.[21] Much of the existing work in this area has been conducted within disciplinary boundaries, divided between scholars of the Latin West or of the Greek East, or beyond that of the Christian Caucasus; between Islamic scholars of the western or eastern shores of the Mediterranean; between those working on antiquity and late antiquity and those working on the later middle ages. The individual case studies presented here are designed to draw out some of the shared ways in which all these different societies used scripts, the degree of interchange and overlap between them, as well as the distinctive traditions and uses of words in each society.

Inscriptions engage in conversations with other inscriptions across space and time. Later texts react both visually and verbally to earlier inscriptions, and they can evoke or echo inscriptions being set up at the same time but in different places or by different cultures. This volume is intended to provoke and further that conversation, which takes many forms. Matthew Canepa in Chapter 1 shows the importance of Hellenistic traditions in the Persian world in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the ways in which these traditions then interacted with the indigenous epigraphic culture over the next millennium. Equally, Jonathan Bloom in Chapter 3 proposes that the Aghlabid inscriptions of North Africa can be traced to the lasting legacy of the surviving inscriptions of the Roman Empire in the region.[22] These conversations took place over time; but there is equally much evidence of similar conversations taking place between contemporaneous neighbouring cultures. Ioanna Rapti in Chapter 9 argues that the inscriptions at Amału Noravankʻ in Armenia are heavily indebted to the Islamic culture of inscriptions, now transposed to a Christian monument. The recurrence of pseudo-writing in Byzantium, Sicily and Seljuk Anatolia points to another common use of the appearance of writing in the medieval world – although in this case the three chapters that examine the phenomenon, by Alicia Walker, Jeremy Johns and Scott Redford (Chapters 5, 6 and 7 respectively), propose different meanings and functions for this imitation of writing.

It is clear that inscriptions, whether formal or informal, do not exist in splendid isolation, but engage in conversations with other inscriptions. Few of the inscriptions discussed in this book stand alone. Rather they are parts of more extensive arrangements of writing, and they must be seen as such. Whether in monasteries or madrasas the layout of texts on walls requires readers to look from one text to another, and the arrangement produces meanings. The conversations take place both over space, between walls, between mountains, between sides of an object – but also across time. Cumulative inscriptions respond to what was already there – answering, developing, altering the context and the meaning of the older text. They mark changes in power. This is true both for formal and informal texts. Ann Marie Yasin (Chapter 2) and Antony Eastmond (Chapter 4)

both demonstrate the ways in which inscriptions attract others and the way in which the chorus of voices that emerge gains resonance from the multitude of writing. Conversations also happen between languages, as the examples of multilingual inscriptions in this volume show.[23]

MEMORY AND PERFORMATIVITY

When read, inscriptions serve as prompts to memory, never less so than when modern scholars use them to reconstruct people or events otherwise forgotten by history. This function was clearly always central to their existence. However, memories could be encoded in other aspects of an inscription's appearance. Alicia Walker, in Chapter 5 on the pseudo-writing in the Byzantine monastery at Hosios Loukas, argues that writing could embed and evoke memories through form. This is an idea that recurs in Stefania Gerevini's Chapter 10 about the fourteenth-century inscriptions in Genoa cathedral. She shows the way in which the past (however fictitious) could become a tangible and apparently permanent part of the present. However, as Jonathan Bloom shows in Chapter 3, memory could be eradicated, and the consequences of this loss should not be ignored by contemporary historians. Whether inscriptions are totally eradicated or only selectively erased (as at Sfax), the idea that we are meant to remember to forget what is destroyed is apparent from the empty spaces left behind. The absence of a text is as important as its presence. This form of *damnatio memoriae* has a long history that looks back to the Roman and before that the Egyptian world.[24]

The contents and design of texts also raise questions about their performative aspects: the layout, arrangement and re-arrangement or reuse of texts affect how buildings are viewed, as well as the ways in which texts institutionalise and affect communities' memories in public spaces. The linear nature of most Christian and Islamic writing requires readers to approach it in particular ways, especially when presented in monumental form. These texts thus lead viewers through monuments and objects in particular ways. In Chapter 7 Scott Redford evokes this successive layering of texts in the Qaratay Madrasa – the ways in which different types of text, presented in different scripts, led students from the portal to the interior, from the ground up to heaven, from consideration of moral behaviours on earth to the celebration of divine mysteries in heaven. There is thus a logic, and an order, to looking at these monuments and objects, determined by their inscriptions. However, it can easily be misunderstood by those who do not understand the writing system involved. This is evident in Ernst Kühnel's catalogue of Islamic ivories published posthumously in 1971.[25] His editors understood that the inscriptions helped organise the appearance of the objects, and so they laid out multiple photographs of each object to lead the viewer round them, starting from the beginning of the main inscription. However, they rotated each object clockwise, whereas the Arabic inscriptions actually require the objects to

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be rotated in the opposite direction; each ivory is thus effectively presented in reverse. In Chapter 5 Alicia Walker argues that even pseudo-writing could have a performative element as viewers' expectations of the linearity of writing encouraged them to circumambulate the church at Hosios Loukas.

The eleven essays gathered in this book bring together all these themes, but their case studies are divided across a wide chronological and geographical range. They show the common ways in which writing could be used to inform but also manipulate viewers, and the ways in which the appearance of writing created its own meanings above and beyond the content of the texts themselves. The essays also reveal the culturally specific ways in which different societies exploited inscriptions, depending on the form of alphabets and writing systems employed and their possibilities and limitations. The expectations of viewers and readers about inscriptions also varied. The types of text they believed that they would encounter varied, as did the degree of authority, power or spirituality with which they imbued those texts. These essays show the possibilities for new ways of thinking about how inscriptions can be studied, revealing much about the ways in which different cultures appropriated, adapted and developed the epigraphic habits of their neighbours and predecessors. They show the power of the non-verbal qualities of the written word.

NOTES

1. For an introduction see Peter A. Andersen, *Nonverbal communication: Forms and functions*, 2nd edition (Long Grove, IL, 2007).

2. *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* 18 vols, eds. Étienne Combe, Jean Sauvaget, Gaston Wiet (Cairo, 1931–91). The new on-line version of the corpus now includes photographs where available: www.epigraphie-islamique.org.

3. For example, A. A. Khachatrian, *Korpus arab-skikh nadpisei Armenii* (Erevan, 1987); I. A. Orbeli, *Corpus Inscriptionum Armenicarum*, 8 vols. (Erevan, 1966–).

4. Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mam-luks: A history of the architecture and its culture* (London, 2007), 211; Abdallah Kahil, *The Sultan Hasan Complex in Cairo, 1357–1364: A case study in the formation of Mamluk style*, Beiruter Texte und Studien 98 (Beirut, Würzburg, 2008).

5. Armando Petrucci, *Public lettering: Script, power, and culture* (Chicago and London, 1993), originally published as *La Scrittura: Ideologia e rappresentazione* (Turin, 1980).

6. Liz James, '"And shall these mute stones speak?" Text as art', in *Art and text in Byzantine culture*, ed. Liz James (Cambridge, 2007), 188–206.

7. Catherine Jolivet-Lévy and Nicole Lemaigre Demesnil, 'Saint-Serge de Matianè, son décor sculpté et ses inscriptions', *Travaux et Memoires* 15 (2005), 67–84.

8. William K. Prentice, "Magical formulae on lintels of the Christian period in Syria," *American Journal of Archaeology* 10.2 (1906), 137–50.

9. Tim Greenwood, "A corpus of early medieval armenian inscriptions," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), 27–91, at 82–3, no.6.

10. On these ideas see Antony Eastmond, "Monograms and the art of unhelpful writing in Late Antiquity," in *Sign and design*, eds. Jeffrey Hamburger and Brigitte M. Bedos-Rezak (Washington DC, forthcoming).

11. Oleg Grabar, 'Graffiti or proclamations: Why write on buildings?', in *The Cairo heritage*, ed. D. Behrens-Abouseif (Cairo, 2006), 69–75 reprinted in his *Islamic Art and Beyond* [Constructing the Study of Islamic Art: 3] (Ashgate: Variorum reprints, 2006), Study XVII, 239–44.

12. Liz James, '"And shall these mute stones speak?" Text as art'.

13. Michael Camille, 'Seeing and reading: Some visual implications of medieval literacy and illiteracy', *Art History* 8 (1985), 26–49.

14. Paul Saenger, *Space between words: The origins of silent reading* (Stanford, 1997).

15. John Baines, 'The earliest Egyptian writing: Development, context, purpose,' in *The first writing. Script invention as history and process*, ed. S. Houston (Cambridge, 2004).

16. Mary Beard, 'The function of the written word in Roman religion', in *Literacy in the Roman world*, Journal of Roman Archaeology. Supplementary Series 3, eds. Mary Beard, A. K. Bowman, M. Corbier, et al. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1991), 35–58.

17. William V. Harris, *Ancient literacy* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1989); and the discussion of it in 'Literacy in the Roman world', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. Supplementary Series 3, eds. Mary Beard, A. K. Bowman, M. Corbier, et al. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1991).

18. Herbert C. Youtie, 'Because they do not know letters', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 19 (1975), 101–8.

19. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne eds., *Art and text in ancient Greek culture* (Cambridge, 1994); Jas Elsner, ed. *Art and text in Roman culture* (Cambridge, 1996); Liz James ed. *Art and text in Byzantine culture* (Cambridge, 2007); Sheila S. Blair, *Text and image in medieval Persian art* (Edinburgh, 2013). Also see Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic inscriptions* (Edinburgh, 1998); Irene A. Bierman, *Writing signs: The Fatimid public text* (Berkeley CA, 1998).

20. In Byzantine studies, this is most evident in Liz James, '"And shall these mute stones speak?" Text as art'; Amy Papalexandrou, 'Text in context: Eloquent monuments and the Byzantine beholder', *Word & Image* 17.3 (2001), 259–83.

21. Ramsay Macmullen, 'The epigraphic habit in the Roman Empire', *American Journal of Philology* 103.3 (1982), 233–46; Elizabeth A. Meyer, 'Explaining the epigraphic habit in the Roman Empire: The evidence of epitaphs', *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990), 74–97.

22. For the equivalent legacy in medieval Italy see Petrucci, *Public lettering: Script, power, and culture*.

23. See also Antony Eastmond, 'Inscriptions and authority in Ani', in *Der Doppeladler – Byzanz und die Seldschuken in Anatolien vom späten 11. bis 13. Jahrhundert*, eds. Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger, F. Daim (Mainz, in press).

24. Greg Woolf, 'Monumental writing and the expansion of Roman society in the early empire', *Journal of Roman Studies* 86 (1996), 22–39. For the erasure of Akhenaten, see B. G. Trigger, B. J. Kemp, D. O'Connor and A. B. Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt: A social history* (Cambridge, 1983), 186–7.

25. Ernst Kühnel, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen, VIII.-XIII. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1971). I owe this observation to Sheila Blair.

✍ CHAPTER ONE

INSCRIPTIONS, ROYAL SPACES AND IRANIAN IDENTITY: EPIGRAPHIC PRACTICES IN PERSIA AND THE ANCIENT IRANIAN WORLD ✍

Matthew P. Canepa

> I am the Mazda-worshipping lord Shabuhr, king of kings of Iran and Non-Iran, of divine nature, son of the Mazda-worshipping lord Ardaxshir, king of kings of Iran, of divine nature, grandson of the lord Pabag the king. I am the sovereign of the Kingdom of Iran. I hold the following lands: Persia . . .
>
> Shabuhr I (239/40–270/2 CE), Kaʿba-ye Zardosht inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran, §1-2.

> I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, king of lands of all races, son of Vishtaspa, of the line of Achaemenes, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Iranian of Iranian lineage. Darius, king of kings, proclaims: by the will of Ahura Mazda these are the lands I held outside of Persia . . . .
>
> Darius I (522–486 BCE), tomb inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran, (DB §2-3).

From the height of the Achaemenid Empire in the early fifth century BCE to the fall of the Sasanian Empire in the mid-seventh century CE, inscriptions played an important role in the development and expression of kingship in Persia and the ancient Iranian world. As with many aspects of the long history of Iranian kingship, stunning continuities and deep ruptures mark Iranian epigraphic practices. Invasions of new peoples and the growth of new empires introduced new scripts and languages, which often displaced those of the previous regime. New visual and architectural traditions modified the ways in which patrons deployed texts and viewers experienced them. Although such cultural discontinuities often rendered the texts of fallen empires' inscriptions incomprehensible or even alien, the inscriptions themselves continued to be powerful visual and topographical

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