

Introduction: Communication and Materiality— Communicative Strategies of Ruling Elites from 3000 BCE through 1500 CE*

“Communication and Materiality” reconsiders the question of literacy and communication in pre-modern societies—thereby assuming that not only the content of a specific message, but also its material form and outlook affect the way in which texts can be understood and interpreted. The volume includes examples from the ancient Orient, the ancient Mediterranean, medieval Europe and the Middle East to elucidate how communication between rulers and subordinates was conceptualized in largely illiterate pre-modern societies with regard to the materiality, performance and presence of the written word. The materiality of the message here includes all visual features that can manipulate the potential beholder, such as writing surfaces, layout, iconic scripts etc. In general, to assess the importance of writing implies understanding the role of the unwritten, i.e. immaterial sphere—as in all of these societies literacy and orality are interwoven aspects of communication. Thus, apart from being materialized in tangible form, messages can be visualized (i.e. embodied) and/or auralized in public.

A common trait of all of the articles is that they deal with societies in which the performance of the (un)written word in order to communicate effectively was crucial. The material is essential for this type of communication, although the significance of performative and/or symbolic acts greatly varies in these societies—as does the extent of (il)literacy. Whereas in ancient Mesopotamia literacy was primarily confined to learned circles, literacy rates among the Arabic speaking population in medieval Cairo were relatively high. However, in both contexts the significance of publicly performed rituals in order to communicate to the population cannot be overestimated: social groups not only applied written forms of communication—they were also dependent on oral modes of expression. Thus they relied on diverse media in order “to spread the royal word” (Christina Tsouparopoulou), i.e. material as well as immaterial forms of communication.

In this sense, the picture on the front page of this volume, the “Young Man in a Blue Coat”, by Aqa Riza (16th century), alludes to the notion of the “messenger” as recently outlined by the German philosopher Sybille Krämer in her monograph on the “metaphysics of mediality”. According to Krämer, the medium of a given message—regardless of its (im)materiality—transforms the content and therefore can be com-

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pared to the role of the messenger.¹ The messenger figures prominently at the intersection between oral and written forms of communication. He translates the written word into spoken expressions (and vice versa)—which was crucial in pre-modern societies in order to interlink and negotiate claims of different social groups. The diverse contexts depicted by our contributors notwithstanding, the volume is to be understood with regard to this common background—the entanglement of the oral and the literal.

Analysing communicative strategies of ruling elites over a period of roughly 4500 years might seem challenging at first sight—especially as the number of contributions to this volume can be classified as manageable. However, we do not aim to provide the reader with a complete handbook on said communicative strategies. Rather, by focusing on very specific contexts, we strive for a systematic and comparative analysis of communicative patterns. At the core of our approach lie two basic questions: How does communication work in mostly illiterate societies—how is it conceptualized by a given regime? And in what way does the (im)materiality of a given message affect the communicative process between senders and/or addressees?

Christina Tsouparopoulou (“Spreading the Royal Word: The (Im)Materiality of Communication in early Mesopotamia”) analyses “communicative processes employed by rulers in Mesopotamia [...] to reach both their literate and illiterate audiences and transfer their ‘knowledge’” and thereby focuses on “objects and practices in three periods in Mesopotamian history”. She describes the communicating actors as “nodes” who communicate by means of “communicative objects” as well as by “‘non-communicative’ objects”. By relying on diverse strategies such as the spoken word or purely visual means (“visual text, or else pictorial narrative” on steles), literate and non-literate audiences could be reached. Apart from more (or less) official ways to spread the royal word, Tsouparopoulou assesses the informational significance of gossiping.

Angeliki Karagianni (“Linear B Administration: The Communicative Aspects of Written Media and the Organisation of the Mycenaean Bureaucracy”) analyses macro- and micro-levels of Mycenaean Bureaucracy, with the Linear B script (2nd millennium BCE), the “earliest epigraphic attestation of the Greek language”, as their means of communication. Linear B was a script for short-term information on a very basic level with a “limited thematic coverage”, including syllabic as well as ideographic characters. Communication on the micro-level refers to internal palatial organisation; macro-level communication, by contrast, refers to wider regional or political contexts. As for the context of Linear B, “literacy [...] was apparently restricted to a small class of palace bureaucrats who used inscribed documentation very selectively and for a limited audience that included themselves and/or their close associates [...]. Writing was primarily employed for texts that served as temporary mnemonic records [...]

1 Krämer 2008, 9–19.

rather than as self-explanatory texts for the unknowable reader”. Thus, tablets often contained an “oral component of communication”; “non-textual means” and sealing techniques were more important than the written word. As it is highly probable that even administrators were not all literate, the Linear B system relies not only on ideograms, but also on specific formats that would “facilitate and enable the unambiguous interpretation of their contents by their ‘handler’ and/or ‘readers’”.

According to Lisa Wilhelmi (“Materiality and Reality of the Communication of Divine Will in the Sargonid Period”), “[...] the materiality of the communication is not static and changes character dependent on circumstances such as the sender, recipient and aim of the transmission, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, the specifics of any single communicative act are influenced by the individual correspondent.” In her paper, she focuses on divinatory techniques and how they were communicated to diverse social groups during the Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 911–605 BCE).

Douglas Fear (“*utā pavastāyā utā carmā grftam āha*—Written on Clay and Parchment: Old Persian Writing and Allography in Iranian”) elaborates primarily on Old Persian Cuneiform—a script that was developed for very narrow purposes during the reign of Dareios I (549–486 BCE) and “appears to have been used almost exclusively for the purpose of royal display.” Old Persian cuneiform that features so prominently in the *trilingue* at Bisitūn was “[...] intended to impress, what one might almost call a ‘secondary kind of iconicity’”. Thus it was not meant to be read and understood semantically; rather, it should impress and corroborate the King’s power.

Christoph Mauntel (“Charters, Pitchforks and green Seals. Written Documents between Text and Materiality in late Medieval Revolts”) elaborates on the significance of written documents during late medieval revolts. Literacy by modern standards was “quite limited”, however “written documents enjoyed an aura of credibility and reliability.” Thus reports on the public destruction, seizing, and defiling of unpopular documents or the issuing of new ones are by no means seldom. Illiterates could distinguish between types of documents by their material form, i.e. their colours, seals or display type. The ability to read was therefore not necessary to comprehend symbolic acts in connection with the written word. Mauntel hereby sheds light on the performative aspects of documents: the showing of a document implies communication.

Rebecca Sauer’s contribution (“The Textile Performance of the Written Word”) is an analysis of communication by the textile. Unlike in medieval Europe, literacy rates were relatively high in Mamluk times (1250–1517), though this may not be true for the ruling military class of Turkish mercenaries, who were basically educated but mostly illiterate. Thus it is not surprising that colours and clothing in connection with gifting practices became inflationary for visualizing hierarchies and social bonds. Sauer focuses on the *tashrif* or *khil’a* (robe of honour inscribed with the name of the respective donor) practice as a cultural and vestimentary code that was understood by most inhabitants of Mamluk Egypt regardless of their level of literacy. Symbolically, by

giving a *khil'a*, rulers inscribe themselves onto their allies and/or subjects—the social fabric is therefore corroborated by the textile.

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Bibliography

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