

Anna Krauß, Jonas Leipziger, and Friederike Schücking-Jungblut

# Material Aspects of Reading and Material Text Cultures

## An Introduction

### Material Text Cultures and Text-Anthropologies

Reading and its different practices and modes belong to the most important forms of the reception of script-bearing artefacts, covering a wide range of perceptive modes in the reception of writing.<sup>1</sup> There are manifold possible approaches how to analyse reading. The main reason for this is the fact that the act of reading is dependent on several variables, e. g. material and formal aspects of the writing surface and the writing itself, the text, the reader, and the context(s) in which something is read. As Sterponi puts it: “[R]eading positions one in a web of culturally stipulated relations between bodies, minds, and texts as artifacts and symbols.”<sup>2</sup>

As the title of this volume indicates, the main focus here lies on the *material aspects* of inscribed artefacts and their influence on the act of reading. Although it is not the material artefact, but the text written on it, that is the actual object of reading, the reception of texts is inextricably linked to the material objects bearing them.<sup>3</sup> While the media and artefacts of writing have not been at the forefront of research on reading and reading practices for a long time, the beginning of the digital age and with it the de-materialisation of texts brought into focus also the materiality of non-/pre-digital objects of reading. Starting with the reconstruction of the meaning of (printed) books for the interpretation of their content in the merely French history of the books in the late 1970s and 1980s (esp. Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier) the materiality of the artefacts of reading has increasingly been taken into consideration both in the research on reading practices and in a wide variety of historical and philological disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the present volume joins an ever-growing field of research.<sup>5</sup>

---

1 Cf. Berti et al. 2015, 639.

2 Sterponi 2008, 558f.

3 Cf. e. g. Rautenberg/Schneider 2015a, 95.

4 Cf. Littau 2006, 24f.; Rautenberg/Schneider 2015a, 92–101.

5 One example of the growing interest in the material aspects of reading can be found in the most

---

This publication originated in the Collaborative Research Centre 933 “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies” (subprojects C02 “Tales of the Scriptural as the Basis of a ‘Textual Anthropology’ of the Old Testament” and B04 “Scholarly Knowledge, Drollery or Esotericism? The Masora of the Hebrew Bible in its Various Material Properties”). The CRC 933 is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

Focusing on material aspects means to aim at the centre of reading and reading practices since the physical characteristics of an inscribed object relate to all the aspects of reading mentioned above. On the one hand, both the object and its inscription are shaped by cultural conventions. This does not only refer to the practical and technical aspects of producing an inscribed object which is based on a culture's shared know-how. It also refers to the way in which the producers expected this object to be used based on the shared norms or standards of a reading community's reading practice(s). That is to say that "the specific forms of literacy are defined by the nature of objects and social settings that mediate and shape the practices of writing and reading."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the material and formal features of such an inscribed object influence a reader's handling and reception of both the object and the text. In short: The practice of reading with all its facets cannot be separated from its material preconditions. Moreover, the material artefacts are the only direct access to past reading communities and their respective reading practices.<sup>7</sup> This point is of utmost importance to this volume as the articles are all dealing with such past reading communities. Furthermore, all of these reading communities are placed in a non-typographical setting, i. e. they had no means for an automated mass production of manuscripts and such like. The obvious downside of choosing reading communities which no longer exist as an object of investigation is the simple fact that one is unable to question the actual members about their reading practices or performance of texts. The great advantage of reading communities set in a non-typographical society, however, is that all inscribed objects are unique copies and were each produced for a specific context and mode of reception. While the production of texts for a specific context and mode of reception also holds true for modern day literary production, the individuality of objects inscribed by hand allows for a greater distinction between different reading practices. This is especially important for the comparison of inscribed objects which display texts of the same genre within the same social setting.<sup>8</sup>

While it seems perfectly clear that there is a connection between inscribed objects, reading practices, and readers and that the only direct access to the reading practices of past reading communities lies within the preserved artefacts, it is still necessary to define a methodological "key" which can unlock the information held by the inscribed objects. How can *something* tell us anything about the actual (or at least

---

recent edition of the German compendium *Lesen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (2015) which includes a major part on "Reading in different media" focussing mainly on scrolls, codices/books, newspapers/journals and digital media (Rautenberg/Schneider [eds.] 2015, 255–380: "2.2 Lesen in unterschiedlichen Lesemedien") while its predecessor (Franzmann et al. [eds.] 1999) did only have two smaller paragraphs on print- and digital media.

<sup>6</sup> Perri 2008, 694.

<sup>7</sup> Hilgert 2010, 97: "Man ist zwangsläufig an die nicht-menschlichen, materiell-gegenständlichen Komponenten dieser Praktiken verwiesen, an die [...] *Artefakte*, die ihm [viz. the researcher] als 'Kulturzeugnisse' zur Verfügung stehen" (emphasis original); cf. also Hilgert 2016, 261.

<sup>8</sup> See e. g. the article of Pajunen in this volume.

probable) actions of persons? Is it possible, and if so, how, to distinguish between routinely exercised practices and singular interactions of humans with script-bearing artefacts?<sup>9</sup> To approximately describe reading practices based on an inscribed object, one needs to take into account not only the material context, but also the situational and spatial context in which it was found or to which it (presumably) belonged as well as the human actions that caused this context (presence of the artefact).<sup>10</sup> While the texts must, of course, also be a part of the analysis, a purely text-oriented approach runs the risk to leave out the humans who produced and interacted with the inscribed object itself.<sup>11</sup>

Three epistemic “tools” can be used to unlock the information in a script-bearing artefact:<sup>12</sup>

- a) the material profile: analysis of the material and physical characteristics of an object as well as the practical consequences resulting from these characteristics;
- b) the topology: analysis of the spatial disposition of an object, regarding both its material and social environment;
- c) the “praxeography”: analysis of the singular actions and routinely exercised practices linked to an object.

All three of these fields are, of course, mutually related to each other. Their analysis can be summarised by a term introduced by Markus Hilgert as “praxeologisch orientierte Artefaktanalyse” (the praxeologically oriented analysis of an artefact).<sup>13</sup>

According to this method the questions this volume and its precursory conference addressed were the following:

- How do aspects of the material on which something is written influence the act of reading and vice versa?
- How do the practices pertaining to texts in certain social settings relate to those texts’ materiality?
- What kind of conclusions can be drawn from the material circumstances (e. g. *mise en page* or *mise en texte*) regarding the manner of reading and its social context?
- How do materiality, orality and—if applicable—mnemonic devices affect one another?
- What can be said about the material presence of writings and their secondary uses (magical implications, e. g. amulets, Mezuzot, Tefillin)?
- What observations about the material aspects of reading can be made with respect to the differentiation between codex and scroll?

<sup>9</sup> For the distinction between practices and singular actions cf. Dickmann/Elias/Focken 2015, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hilgert 2016, 262f.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dickmann/Elias/Focken 2015, 138.

<sup>12</sup> For the following cf. Focken et al. 2015, 129; Hilgert 2016, 265.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hilgert 2010, 114f.

## Skope of the Volume and Summaries of the Contributions

The articles in this volume represent a wide cultural and temporal variety of reading communities from ancient Egypt to medieval Judaism. The geographical area they span reaches from the circum-Mediterranean area to central Europe. Their common ground is the non-typographical nature of the inscribed objects and the (predominantly) religious or ritual setting for which they were created. As the conference on which this volume is based was initialised within the framework of the Collaborative Research Center 933 “*Material Text Cultures*” by the Heidelberg Center for Jewish Studies and the Faculty of Theology, Heidelberg University, most of the contributions originate from Biblical and Jewish Studies. The other contributions do not merely fill chronological gaps, they first and foremost offer most helpful insights into (chronologically as well as geographically) neighbouring reading communities and therefore fill highly important information-gaps.

Due to the wide range of time and the geographical spread that the different articles deal with, the editors decided to arrange them in an approximate chronological sequence:

The first contribution dealing with Ancient Egypt (Christoffer Theis) is followed by a number of articles on the material evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Lindsey Askin, Laura Quick, Mika Pajunen, Friederike Schücking-Jungblut, Yehudah Benjamin Cohn, Antony Perrot). Since the Dead Sea Scrolls are the oldest extensive script-bearing artefacts preserved from Ancient Judaism in the southern Levant, their analysis promises valuable insights into both the early reception of the Hebrew Bible and reading practices in Ancient Judaism as a whole. The studies assembled in this volume address material aspects concerning groups of manuscripts—defined from both formal and content-related aspects—, the layout of scrolls and their parts, and different aspects of reading and reception practices. Following this, the next two contributions deal with the shaping of the codex as a new materiality of reading in Antiquity—one with regard to a special type of codex (Andrea Jördens), and the other to a Jewish background of Greek Bible codices (Jonas Leipziger). The following articles address different ancient and medieval religious communities as well as their attitudes towards reading and its material aspects—early Christianity (Jan Heilmann, Christoph Marksches) and Rabbinic (Daniel Picus) and medieval Judaism (Binyamin Goldstein).

Based on two case studies, **Christoffer Theis** (“Material Aspects of Rituals Beyond Their Instructions”) examines the preparation and performance of rituals and their material aspects in Ancient Egypt. From the preserved texts and objects he analyses, he is able to show that the performance of a ritual must not necessarily correspond to its written instruction—a result that completely differs from the scholarly perspective on Ancient Egyptian rituals and their instructions up to now. As Theis demonstrates, there are individual scopes for Egyptian rituals and the concrete

materiality of the *materia sacra* is more important than the correct performance or reading of the text—at least for the two examples used in this article.

Opening the sequence of articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls, **Lindsey Askin** (“Scribal Production and Literacy at Qumran. Considerations of Page Layout and Style”) reflects on the character of literacy at Qumran and, hence, the essential precondition of the rich legacy of script-bearing artefacts found in the Judean Desert. She shows that the Qumran scrolls reflect scribal practices witnessed in manuscripts throughout Egypt and the Mediterranean. Studying both the material evidence and the self-presentation of the *yachad*, the group that in all likelihood owned the enormous library, she emphasises that copying manuscripts was an important but not the epitomising activity at Qumran. She, thus, makes a case for a re-evaluation of how all the manuscripts got to the secluded place near the Dead Sea.

In the following contribution (“Scribal Habits and Scholarly Texts. Codicology at Oxyrhynchus and Qumran”), **Laura Quick** analyses the Aramaic court tales from Qumran against the background of the Greek novel tradition preserved at Oxyrhynchus. As it is the case for the Greek novels that cannot be described as lower-class-literature, her analysis shows that—unlike previous research—there is no distinction between scholarly and non-scholarly Aramaic texts and the scribes that produced them. Writing (and reading) in the ancient world was an elite practice regardless of whether the product can be characterised as fiction or non-fiction.

**Mika Pajunen** (“Reading Psalm and Prayer Manuscripts From Qumran”) examines 119 manuscripts from Qumran classified as psalms or prayer manuscripts. He presents typical characteristics of these artefacts, concerning writing material, layout, language and handwriting, and investigates the readability of the written texts based on factors like script size and the spacing of lines, words, and letters. From this, he establishes criteria in order to tentatively classify the manuscripts into one of the three categories “public ritual use”, “private piety”, and “not formatted for ritual use”. His analysis, thus, provides a frame to consult the manuscripts as to their intended use.

The following article by **Friederike Schücking-Jungblut** (“Reading the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*. Observations on Material, Layout, and Text”) focuses on one group of the manuscripts included in Pajunen’s survey, the ten scrolls containing the *Shirot Olat haShabbat* among the Dead Sea Scrolls. By examining material, layout-related, and (meta-)textual elements, she is able to make educated guesses on the intended reading and reception practices of these manuscripts. Schücking-Jungblut shows that at least some of the manuscripts were likely used in a public liturgical reading, in which the composition was recited in (weekly) parts.

**Yehudah B. Cohn** (“Reading Material Features of Qumran *Tefillin* and *Mezuzot*”) examines the group of small slips from Qumran identified from material and textual aspects as *tefillin* and *mezuzot* manuscripts. In assessing his survey, he stresses the degree of diversity with regard to the verses written on the slips, their format, and *mise-en-page*. He furthermore concludes that these results prove the non-existence

of a fixed set of rules concerning *tefillin* and *mezuzot* at Qumran—neither can they be interpreted as evidence for a proto-*halakhah* nor do they follow a specific sectarian practice. Notwithstanding that, he claims, the slips and their housings can best be seen as amulets against premature death.

In the final contribution dealing with evidence from Qumran, **Antony Perrot** (“Reading an Opisthograph at Qumran”) also focuses on a group of manuscripts held together by their material features. He analyses the opisthograph manuscripts found in Qumran and asks how the reading of these particular manuscripts was “performed”, given the particularity of being written recto and verso. His article shows that opisthograph manuscripts arranged horizontally have been written by the same hand or at least in the same period, were meant for a liturgical occasion, and, thus, can be seen as a prefiguration of the later codex-form; opisthographs arranged vertically, however, follow needs of either re-use or collation and have rather not been read continuously.

In her contribution (“Codices des Typs C und die Anfänge des Blätterns” [= “Type C-Codices and the Origins of Page Turning”]) that is printed in German due to the author’s request, **Andrea Jördens** presents multiple evidence for the so called “type c-codex”, that has not systematically been described so far. A “type c-codex” consists of single sheets of papyrus or parchment, being joined to some kind of “loose-leaf collection”. Presenting examples of such codices, Jördens examines the different types of bookbinding, namely by double holes, which can already be found in the third millennium BCE in the context of ancient wooden or wax tablets. Her results may also question the often-ascribed role of the Christian community in the emergence and implementation of the codex.

**Jonas Leipziger** (“Ancient Jewish Greek Practices of Reading and Their Material Aspects”) concentrates on ancient, Greek speaking Judaism and its Greek bible. He presents a selection of manuscripts and other material evidence, questioning the format of the codex and the presence of so-called *nomina sacra* as exclusively Christian markers of manuscripts’ identity. He shows that *nomina sacra* can also be found in Jewish artefacts, dating from the second/third century onwards so that their presence in artefacts can no longer be regarded as an exclusively Christian scribal feature. In consequence, also a Jewish origin of Greek Bible manuscripts containing *nomina sacra* and previously considered as Christian cannot be excluded. To the contrary, Leipziger works out that the format of the codex can be understood as an important, but long neglected feature of Greek Jewish literary heritage.

The following article (“Reading Early New Testament Manuscripts. *Scriptio continua*, ‘Reading Aids’ and Other Characteristic Features”) by **Jan Heilmann** also addresses the so-called *nomina sacra* although in another context. He examines, whether this feature or other “reading aids” or “lectional signs” in early papyri of the New Testament help to identify manuscripts formatted for public use. After arguing that reading *scriptio continua* did not present any particular difficulties for ancient readers, he discusses the material dimension of an assumed connection between

specific features of early New Testament manuscripts and their actual use, especially in early Christian worship. While in scholarship diacritics (breathings, accents, diaereses), apostrophes, ektheses, paragraphoi, or the *nomina sacra* have been taken as criteria of an assumed public or liturgical setting, Heilmann is able to show that these “reading aids” do not permit to infer their primary context of use at all.

**Christoph Marksches** held a keynote lecture at the conference on which this collection is based that is also included in this volume (“What Ancient Christian Manuscripts Reveal About Reading [and About Non-Reading]”). Whereas the preceding contribution focuses on details within script-bearing artefacts, Marksches deals with their intellectual and institutional framework. He questions the characterisation of early Christianity as a “textual” or “reading community” by investigating the literacy of leading figures on the one hand and the handling of books in Christian communities on the other hand. He is able to show that there was a considerable number of *illiterati* and analphabets even among the bishops. Furthermore, also the presence of (biblical) books cannot be taken as evidence for a widespread practice of careful reading, as they frequently served as magical objects or items of liturgical veneration. Marksches, thus, concludes from his examples that early Christian communities can hardly be described as “reading communities” although, of course, books and written artefacts did play a major role in early Christianity.

From early Christianity the focus then shifts to ancient and medieval Judaism. In the first contribution of this group (“Reading Regularly. The Liturgical Reading of Torah in its Late Antique Material World”) **Daniel Picus** examines the formation of the *parashah*, i. e. the liturgical units of text that were read in synagogues according to Rabbinic thought. He presents three sets of criteria that the rabbis of late antiquity took into consideration when they excerpted portions of the Torah into *parshiyyot* for reading: performative or liturgical criteria, content-based or thematic criteria, and physical criteria. By studying Rabbinic discourses on the formation of the liturgical units of Torah, he identifies the function of these criteria and uses them to identify the rabbis’ orientation towards and understanding of the biblical texts.

In the final contribution of this volume, **Binyamin Goldstein** (“Encountering the Grotesque. The Material Scribal Culture of Medieval Jewish Magic”) presents an exemplary survey of unusual and grotesque writing materials in medieval and early modern Jewish magic scribal culture. His examples predominantly stem from unpublished Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts from the Vatican library, showing a variety of unusual materials. He demonstrates that in many cases there is a clear correspondence between the media prescribed and the intended effect: the writing material, thus, makes evident the desired effect or locus of effect of the spell. But this materialisation of the magical texts decreases in early modern times, as grotesque writing material is significantly less frequently employed from the 15th century onwards.

All in all, the articles of the present volume illuminate how including the interpretation of material aspects can further the research on reading and reading practices. Material and technical details of the artefacts and their inscriptions give

hints as to what the objects were meant or used for and by whom. Including these aspects into the research on ancient reading practices and interpreting them leads to new or enhanced theories on the presence and practices of reading in past communities. On the other hand, many contributions do also reveal the limits of such an approach: in most cases it is simply impossible to get beyond theses on the intended reading practices. The actual performances of the written word are gone with their actors and cannot be brought back—not even by the material remains of their reading practices.

## Bibliography

- Berti, Irene/Haß, Christian D./Krüger, Kristina/Ott, Michael R. (2015), “Lesen und Entziffern”, in: Thomas Meier, Michael R. Ott and Rebecca Sauer (eds.), *Materiale Textkulturen. Konzepte – Materialien – Praktiken* (Materiale Textkulturen 1), Berlin/München/Boston, 639–650.
- Dickmann, Jens-Arne/Elias, Friederike/Focken, Friedrich-Emanuel (2015), “Praxeologie”, in: Thomas Meier, Michael R. Ott and Rebecca Sauer (eds.), *Materiale Textkulturen. Konzepte – Materialien – Praktiken* (Materiale Textkulturen 1), Berlin/München/Boston, 135–146.
- Focken, Friedrich-Emanuel/Elias, Friederike/Witschel, Christian/Meier, Thomas (2015), “Material(itäts)profil – Topologie – Praxeographie”, in: Thomas Meier, Michael R. Ott and Rebecca Sauer (eds.), *Materiale Textkulturen. Konzepte – Materialien – Praktiken* (Materiale Textkulturen 1), Berlin/München/Boston, 129–134.
- Franzmann, Bodo/Hasemann, Klaus/Löffler, Dietrich/Schön, Erich (eds.) (1999), *Handbuch Lesen*, München.
- Hilgert, Markus (2010), “‘Text-Anthropologie’: Die Erforschung von Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen als hermeneutische Strategie”, in: Markus Hilgert (ed.), *Altorientalistik im 21. Jahrhundert. Selbstverständnis, Herausforderungen, Ziele* (Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 142), Berlin, 85–124.
- Hilgert, Markus (2016), “Materiale Textkulturen. Textbasierte historische Kulturwissenschaften nach dem *material culture turn*”, in: Herbert Kalthoff, Torsten Cress and Tobias Röhl (eds.), *Materialität. Herausforderungen für die Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Paderborn, 255–267.
- Littau, Karin (2006), *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*, Cambridge/Malden.
- Perri, Antonio (2008), “Afterword: Reading without spirit?”, in: *Text&Talk. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies* 28, 691–698.
- Rautenberg, Ursula/Schneider, Ute (eds.) (2015), *Lesen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Berlin/Boston.
- Rautenberg, Ursula/Schneider, Ute (2015a), “Historisch-hermeneutische Ansätze der Lese- und Leserforschung”, in: Ursula Rautenberg and Ute Schneider (eds.), *Lesen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Berlin/Boston, 85–114.
- Sterponi, Laura (2008), “Introduction”, in: *Text&Talk. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse & Communication Studies* 28, 555–559.