Sascha A. Schultz

Inscriptions on Stone

Stone is a fairly common material to be inscribed in medieval literature, and not merely because there are many artefacts consisting of stone—ranging from architectural elements, monuments (like statues or memorials), and tombs, to weapons, jewellery, talismans or tablets—in the medieval environment. An object made of stone is heavier than one of wood or parchment; it is long-lasting and resistant, transferring the message it bears across generations without losing its function as what Latour would call “an employee of its enunciate”.¹ As a material, stone is resistant to the degree that it can even outlive linguistic changes, potentially rendering the message of an inscription less comprehensible to later readers.² This permanence characteristic of stone—what Jeffrey J. Cohen calls *linguistic endurance*—is compounded by the fact that it is nearly impossible to correct script in stone without damaging it.³ Usually, inscriptions on stone are carved, chiselled, or moulded (though, in some cases, they can be applied by drawing or painting). The first two methods are the most traditional ways of inscribing text on stone; once the letters have been inscribed, they can hardly ever be erased, since parts of the material are carved out in order to create text. If corrections are carried out, they remain visible in most cases since more material has to be removed. These modifications of stone inscriptions, visible to the eyes of the receiver, then belong to the *biography* of the inscription. Stone suggests perdurance. Stone does not forget.⁴

Medieval texts with inscriptions in stone highlight this understanding of the endurance of stone suggesting that medieval authors recognised and emphasised the resistance of the material. This resistance makes stone the substance most amenable for preserving memory. One example, *Le Roman de Brut*, mentions an inscription on a stone memorial commemorating Rodric:

*En la pierre out une escripture,
Mien escient **ki encor dure**,
Ki testemonie l'aventure
E conte la discunfiture,
Que Marius Rodric ocist*

On the stone there is an inscription,
that is still there today as far as I know,
that testifies to the adventure
and that tells about the destruction
that Marius killed Rodric

¹ Latour 1994, 40.

² Cf. Latour 1994, 110.

³ Cohen 2015, 109.

⁴ Cf. Balke et al. 2015, 256.

I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Dörr for his professional assistance and expert advice that helped me in the process of writing this article.

E la pur ço la pierre mist.

*Encor i est, ço oi retraire,
Si l'apele l'on Vestinaire.⁵*

(5177–5184, emphasis mine).

and that is why he laid this stone,

it is still there, is what I have heard people say,
and they call it Vestinaire.⁶

The author repeatedly mentions the durability of stone and that, as far as he knows, the stone can still be contemplated at the moment of his narration. With the words *ki encor dure* and *Encor i est*, he also implies that it might even be there in the future due to the resistance and longevity of stone.

Stone's durability can also reinforce the social significance of the inscriptions it bears, as illustrated by the famous stone tablets of Moses bearing the Ten Commandments.⁷ The durable character of the material stone underlines the importance of the laws inscribed in the tablets, suggesting their universal and transhistorical relevance. The broad applicability of the law is also highlighted by how inscription linguistically defines its audience. Considering the semantic content of legal discourse, it should be noted that the recipient must remain relatively undefined, allowing a law to resonate across time. Nevertheless, the inscription of a law in stone symbolises the stability of its meaning. While the "Thou shalt not" of the Ten Commandments may seem self-evident, the typical linguistic register of a law distinctly differs from everyday language. A law usually contains fairly specific technical vocabulary in more complex sentence structures, paradoxically making it less accessible to the very public for whom it is designed. This is why linguists argue that the purpose of a legal text is not to be comprehensible to the public but to be translated and applied by professional lawyers.⁸ Such a rather limited sociolinguistic target makes legal texts a very particular form of writing. We see this in medieval literature as well, where the stability of the material reinforces other methods of controlling the centrifugal aspects of language, such as, for instance, the use of Latin. A case in point is William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1360–1399), in which the dreaming narrator Will meets Hope and discovers a document inscribed in stone:

*"Lat se thi lettres," quod I, "we myghte the
lawe knowe."*

*He plukkede forth a patente, a pece of an
hard roche,*

*Whereon was writen two wordes on this
wise yglosed;*

"Let's see the letters," said I, "[so that] we might
know the law."

He picked up a patent, a piece of a hard rock,

Whereon were written two edicts glossed in this
manner:

⁵ In this case, the author's description of the inscription is the relevant piece of information to make this point, even though the following inscription is part of the corpus of Old French inscriptions, it is not as crucial in this specific context.

⁶ Unless a translated edition is given in the bibliography, the translations are my own.

⁷ Cf. Gertz 2016, 188–192; Schaper 2016.

⁸ Cf. Ogorek 2004, 297–306.

Dilige Deum et proximum tuum—
This was the tixte trewely—I took ful good
yeme.
The glose was gloriously writen with a gilt
penne:
 In hiis duobus mandatis tota lex penhet
 et prophete.
 (179–15)

Love God and your neighbour—
 That was the text truly—I paid close attention.
 The gloss was gloriously written with a gilt pen:
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two
commandments.

The inscribed legal text and gloss, a reference to Matthew 22:37–40 written in Latin, the socially privileged language of scholars, stands in contrast to the rest of the Middle English text. Even though the Ten Commandments are meant to be understood as religious and ethical guidelines that serve as the basis of social coexistence, the Latin paraphrase here makes them inaccessible to all but a few interpreters.

The stone tablets of the Old Testament feature in other medieval texts as a way of thinking about the divine will ordering not just a present society but time itself. The tablets present a sacred and divine form of writing, as we see in the Old English poem *Andreas*, when Andreas addresses the material stone, personifying it and honouring its role in the past:

Hwæt, ðu golde eart,
sincgife, sylla! On ðe sylf cyning
wrat, wuldres god, wordum cyððe
recene geryno, ond ryhte æ
getacnode on tyn wordum,
meotud mihtum swið. Moyses sealde,
swa hit soðfæste syðþan heoldon,
modige magopegnas, magas sine,
godfyrhte guman, Iosua ond Tobias.
Nu ðu miht gecnawan þæt þe cyning engla
gefrætweode furður mycle

giofum geardagum þonne eall gimma cynn.
þurh his halige hæc þu scealt hræðe cyðan
gif ðu his ondgitan ænige hæbbe.
 (1495–1521)

Hear me, you are better
 than gold or gifts of treasure! On you the King
 Himself, Glorious God, in His words revealed
 His mysteries in one instant and just laws
 in Ten Commandments did inscribe,
 Measurer wise in might! He gave them to Moses
 just as later with truth unwavering, they were kept
 by brave young thegns, kinsmen of Moses,
 the God-fearing men Joshua and Tobias.
 Now you may understand how the King of Angels
 adorned you in ancient days with gifts far
 beyond any
 He gave to any family of precious stones.
 By His sacred order you are quickly to show
 if you have any understanding of this!

In this case, the material stone is glorified as a bearer of the divine commandments and is even compared to other materials, such as gold (*ðu golde eart*). The ubiquity of stone here is contrasted with the precious materials typical of religious practice to paradoxically elevate the mundane by virtue of its serviceability in the divine plan. The address further highlights that stone can also be a witness of time, of historic events and, as such, an admonisher to future readers of the inscription it bears. It is almost as if inscribed stone embodies the cardinal virtue of Prudence, which, having witnessed past, possibly conflictual, events, calls the reader of the inscription to reason

and to acknowledge what happened at this very place. This appeal to commemorate the historical personalities or events connected to the stone inscription simultaneously invites its receivers to reconsider their future actions through its function as a memorial. Consequently, since numerous stone inscriptions affect their receivers, they can be seen as ancient influencers of future actions and generations. The creator of a stone inscription anticipates a future communication between the stone, as a bearer of a message significant enough to perpetuate and pass on to others, and potential future readers. The fact that future consumers of the message are influenced means that the inscription is appellative, granting the object agency. Scholars refer to this potential of (particularly man-made) objects to affect the attitudes, actions, and practices of humans as *affordance*.⁹

In order to understand how a stone can affect the humans that interact with it, we need to investigate how stones function as communicative artefacts. The situation of a stone inscription plays an essential role in the communicative act since the heaviness of the material means script-bearing stone artefacts tend to be immobile, manifesting a phenomenon termed *place-bound visibility*.¹⁰ As Laura Velte's chapter on tombs in this volume illustrates, the place-bound visibility of inscribed stone produces an *effect of presence* for the deceased by creating the temporary illusion of suspended limits of life. The substantial presence and place-bound visibility of stone, in particular, establishes a kind of physical contact with beings from the past. This being the case, stone inscriptions tend to be primarily locostatic, emphasising the connection between the script they bear and their location. For this reason, stone inscriptions often contain deictic words or phrases—expressions that require further contextual information, such as the speaker's and receiver's location—to be fully understood.

Medieval literature offers a number of examples of deictic expressions in stone inscriptions. Narrated epitaphs illustrate spatial deixis,¹¹ which refers to "the marking of orientation or position in space of the referent of a linguistic expression",¹² using the deictic local adverb *here / hic*, as in: *Here lyth swete Blauncheffloure / That Florys lovyd par amoure* ("Here lies sweet Blancheflor, who Florys loved with all his heart", *Floris and Blancheflor* 209–218); or *Hic situs est typicus aries, duo cornua cuius / regit Alexander, totius malleus orbis* ("Here rests in the figure of an Aries, with whose two horns he ruled, Alexander, the hammer of the whole world", Walter of Châtillon, *Alexandreis* 7, 379–7, 430). The deictic demonstrative pronoun *this (diz/diðsem/istud)* creates object deixis, as in the religious poem *Von Gottes Zukunft* by Heinrich von Neustadt: *Diz ist dez frides palas* ("This is the palace of peace", 1685–1728). The famous sword in the stone passage, here from the *Prose Merlin*, also features such an inscription:

⁹ Fox/Panagiotopoulos/Tsouparopoulou 2015, 63–70.

¹⁰ Cf. Balke et al. 2015, 249.

¹¹ The following categorisation is based on Marchello-Nizia 2006, 103–120.

¹² Finegan 2008, 195.

And he redde the letteres that seiden, “Who taketh this swerde out of this ston sholde be kynge by the eleccion of Jhesu Criste”. And when he hadde redde this letteres, he seide to the peple what it ment. (75–80)

And he read the letters that said, “Whoever takes this sword out of this stone shall be king by the election of Jesus Christ”. And once he had read these letters he explained to the people what they meant.

Finally, deictic personal pronouns *I / me / my* create person deixis, as we see in the following inscription on a throne in the verse romance *Der Große Alexander aus der Wernigeroder Handschrift*:

Mir dient Parthus und India,
Medus, Arabs und Asyrius,
Mesopotann, Persa, Celitus,
Mir dient judische diet,
Welhische lant. Den Moren geriet
Ich mit maht **mich** nahen,
Macedon, Krichen enfahen
Musten auch zu herren **mich**.
(1397, emphasis mine)

Parthus and India,
Medes, Arabia and Syria,
Mesopotamia, Persia and Celitus,
the Jewish people
and the Roman lands served me.
I approached the Moors with power,
the Macedonians and the Greeks also
had to receive me as Lord.

The inscription on the stone throne lists the lands that owe Alexander taxes. The significance of the inscription is underlined by its exceptional length: it goes on for 33 verses.

Deictic expressions found in stone inscriptions function to orient both fictional characters and readers. Although spatial and object deixis in stone inscriptions craft a tight connection between the message and the place and the inscribed object, they differ in what they reference. Spatially deictic expressions usually refer to the surrounding location in which the script-bearing stone inscription has been placed. If they refer to a point of reference in their surroundings, it is identifiable for the recipient once he himself is present. The old King Lancelot's grave the Middle High German *Prosalancelot* illustrates this:

Under dißem sargk lytt der lichnam konig Lancelots, der konig Bans vatter was von Bonewig, in dem brunnen syn heubt. Der lichnam sol nit ußer der erden genomen werden oder der sargk off gebrochen, biß so lang der best ritter der welt syn hant daran legt. (II, 524)

Under this coffin lies the corpse of king Lancelot, father of king Ban of Bonewig, in the well his head. The corpse must not be taken out and the coffin must not be opened until the best knight in the world touches it with his hand.

The deictic demonstrative pronoun *dißem* combined with the spatial preposition *under* and the lexeme *sargk* specify the exact extralinguistic point of reference. The demonstrative pronoun reveals the proximity of the object to the inscription. Comparing

that to the expression *in dem brunnen*, we note that the point of reference of the well is not as close to the script-bearing artefact as the *coffin*, since the inscription does not apply the demonstrative pronoun, but the definite article. If the inscription said *in dißem brunnen* instead of *in dem brunnen*, it would probably be placed directly on the well. But through the presence of the potential recipient, one can nevertheless clearly identify which well is meant because it is situated proximate to the stone inscription. The character's and reader's identification and location of the objects presented in the narrative help to create a spatial story-world. Consequently, spatial deictic expressions can refer to the script-bearing artefact itself or its immediate surroundings, as well as to objects situated further away. Obviously, they could also refer to objects having disappeared in the course of time, to produce a puzzle or highlight an absence.

Object deixis, typically demonstrative pronouns that refer specifically to an object, are, on the other hand, locally independent, especially if they are self-referential and locomobile, like the inscribed gems in Gahmuret's helmet in *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach: *durch disen helm ein tjoste sluoc / den werden der ellen truoc* ("through this helmet a joust has slain / the worthy and brave man, 108,3f.) The examples of self-referential locomobile stone inscriptions are not numerous, which is what makes the example of Gahmuret's helmet all the more exceptional (although this helmet is no longer movable in this arrangement of the tomb). The particularity of gemstones, as a specific type of stone often used for jewellery, is that it is not only possible to inscribe words on them, but also to write with the gemstones themselves by forming letters with them—as we see with the dog leash in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Titurel*.¹³ As to their materiality, Cohen points out that unlike "friable stones", "[a] diamond becomes a precious gem because its rarity, lucidity, and density can sustain strong confederation with human and inhuman forces, tools, economic and aesthetic systems".¹⁴ Additionally, the gemstone is a fairly mobile—or *nomadic*, as Cohen puts it—type of stone because of its lighter weight. Its object history is unique since in medieval times it was considered to be a "potential sojourner from a lost age or unreachable terrain, ready to speak its story of temporal and geographical nomadism".¹⁵ When gemstones appear, prepared to speak via their inscriptions, they are, like Gahmuret's helmet exceptionally unique objects.

If most stone inscriptions are self-referential and locostatic, they intrinsically combine the object they are referring to with the place they have been situated and the message they bear, as is the case for tombstones and commemorative columns, for example. This is why spatial and object deixis can be connected, though their specific points of reference are usually not exactly equivalent. This also means that object

¹³ Cf. Laura Velte's and Michael R. Ott's chapter on inscriptions in German literature and the Cabinet of Curiosities chapter by Ricarda Wagner, Michael R. Ott, Christine Neufeld, Maria Krümpelmann, Tamara Ludwig and Ludger Lieb in this volume.

¹⁴ Cohen 2015, 33.

¹⁵ Cohen 2015, 52.

that “comments upon its own material identity”.¹⁸ The semantic content alludes to the way this object is used (*Thorgh me men gon*) and the use of prosopopoeia personifies the stone gate. It speaks directly to the recipients of the words written on it, even applying imperatives such as *Be glad* or *passe in*. The personified object then transmits a message that does not change according to its recipient, but, as Ramey argues, “it ‘boldly announces’ an errand-speech”.¹⁹ It is a message, written on a place-bound object that is important for potential users of the object. In this case, they are informed what kind of men have gone through the gate and what awaits them behind it, which highlights not only the significance of the object, but also the place it is situated.

In the reception of a stone inscription, conventionally characterised by the absence of its creator, the addresser’s identity can remain a mystery to the reader. In some cases, it is possible to reconstruct the original communication situation and thereby identify the addresser. On a tombstone, for example, the origin is certainly more obvious than on other stone inscriptions—even though, there are examples, such as the alliterative poem *St Erkenwald* (late fourteenth century), where workers discover a grave with an illegible epitaph written on it.²⁰ In this case, the fact that the inhabitant of the grave and its creators remain unknown is essential for the fundamental mystery *St Erkenwald* must solve. As for stone inscriptions that are not written on tombstones, the reader might require some additional knowledge as to the exact circumstances of the artefact’s creation, including the intention of the message. The tablets Eve instructs Seth to inscribe in the Middle English *Life of Adam and Eve* (fifteenth century) serve as an example for this:

Therefore here thou, my sone Seeth: make thou tweyne tablys, of stoon and of schynyng cley erthe, and wryte there-ynne the lijf of youre fadir and of me, and tho thingis that yee han herd and seen of us. For whanne God schal iuge al oure kynde by water, the tablys of erthe wolen loose, and the tablis of stoon wolen dwelle; forsothe, whanne God wole iuge mankynde by fier, thane wole [the tablis of stoon loose, and] the tablis of erthe endure. (97–99)

Therefore hear thou, my son Seth: make thou two tablets, of stone and of shining clay earth, and write therein the life of your father and of me, and those things that you have heard and seen of us. For when God shall judge our kind by water, the tablets of earth will be destroyed, and the tablets of stone will remain; verily, when God will judge humanity by fire, then will the tablets of stone be destroyed and the tablets of earth endure.

First of all, the fact that Eve highlights the properties of the different materials is fairly exceptional. She tells her son to make tablets both of stone and of clay, so no matter how God judges them—by water or by fire—one of the materials would survive.

¹⁸ Ramey 2013, 336.

¹⁹ Ramey 2013, 339.

²⁰ Cf. Ricarda Wagner’s and Christine Neufeld’s article on inscriptions in British literature in this volume.

According to the text the stone tablet would be lost if God judged them by fire. Consequently, the intention behind the creation of this inscription is to perpetuate the story of Adam and Eve and to transmit it to future generations. After Seth finishes the tablets they are stored in his father's oratory, where they were preserved and only found after the flood. Solomon was the first one to attempt to decipher them: *and he preyede to God that he myghte undirstonde the wrytynge of the tablis* (and he prayed to god that he might understand the writing of the tablets, *Life of Adam and Eve* 97–99). He wants to know what the inscriptions say, but also needs additional information about where they are from and who made them—pieces of information that an angel provides:

Then appeeride to hym the aungel of God, seyinge: I am the aungel that helde the hond of Seth whanne he wroot this with an irun, haldynge it in his right hond. And yn these two tablis weren wryten manye wonderful profecyes; and I sey to thee, Salamon, thow shalt knowe the scripture that is wryten in these tablis. And these thablis weren in the place where Adam and Eve weren wonyd to preye to God, therefore it bihoveth thee to make there a dwellynge place to God.' And thane Salamon clepide these lettris on these tablis Achiliacos, that is to seye, with-uten techyng of lypis wryten with the fyngir of the right hond of Seeth, the aungel of God holdynge it. Thanne made Salamon an hous in the name of God, men to preyen ynne; and in tho tablis was founden wryten that that was profecyed of Adam seven sythis. (97–99)

Then appeared to him the angel of God, saying; I am the angel that held the hand of Seth when he wrote this with an iron, holding it in his right hand. And in these two tablets were written many wonderful prophecies; and I say to thee, Solomon, thou shalt know the scripture that is written in these tablets. And these tablets were in the place where Adam and Eve were accustomed to pray to God, and therefore it is fitting for you to make a dwelling place for God there. And then Solomon called these letters on the tablets, Achiliacos, that is to say, without teaching of lips, written with the finger of the right hand of Seth, the angel of God holding it. Then Solomon made a house in the name of God, for men to pray in; and in those tablets was found written that which was prophesied by Adam seven times.

The uniqueness of the example of *Life of Adam and Eve* is that it focuses not only on the way the inscriptions on the tablets are created, but also on the reasons why they chose the materials, the state of the tablets after time has passed and the willingness of potential and actual recipients to understand what they communicate, including a witness offering information on how the inscriptions came to be. All these factors play into the communication created by the inscription, both on the sending and on the receiving end. In this sense, stone inscriptions are elegant examples of Ehlich's concept of a divided communication in texts, where the process of *speaking* is separated from the process of *hearing*. The speaker, thus, creates a potential communication situation; the hearer, on the other hand, has to decipher it by reading it and considering the intention behind the message.²¹ To do that with stone inscriptions, the hearer has to consider not only the speaker's possible intentions, but also the object

²¹ Ehlich 2007, 16.

that is written on and the place that it has been situated. Stone inscriptions confront the potential readers with enigmatic pieces of information and deictic expressions play a crucial role in this regard.

In the example of Iphis' and Araxarathen's epitaph in *Confessio Amantis* by John Gower (1390), we can see that personal deictic expressions in tombstones additionally have the particularity of a non-determined addressee that can vary depending on the respective onlooker.

*And for men schal the sothe wite,
Thei have here epitaphe write,
As thing which scholde abide stable.
The lettres graven in a table
Of marbre were and seiden this:
"Hier lith, which slowh himself, Iphis,
For love of Araxarathen:
And in ensample of tho wommen,
That soffren men to deie so,
Hire forme a man mai sen also,
Hou it is tordn fleissh and bon
Into the figure of a ston.
He was to neysse and sche to hard.
Be war forthi hierafterward;
Ye men and wommen bothe tuo,
Ensampleth you of that was tho".*
(4, 3652–3684.)

And so that men shall know the truth,
They have written an epitaph here,
As a thing which should abide permanently.
The letters were engraved in a table
of marble and said this:
"Here lies Iphis, who slew himself,
For love of Araxarathen:
And as example of those women
That suffer men to die in this manner,
Her form a man may see also,
How it is turned[,] flesh and bone[,]
Into the figure of a stone.
He was too soft and she too hard.
Be mindful therefore hereafter;
Ye men and women [both of you],
Take heed of what happened".

Here, too, the pragma-semantic content of the stone inscription needs to be reconstructed and deciphered by the recipient, leading to a certain enigmatic element. It is not only created through the use of spatial deictic expressions, such as *hier*, referring to Iphis' and Araxarathen's grave, but also personal deictic elements, such as *Ye men and women* and *you*, and, most notably, the explicit address to and direct request of potential readers in the form of two imperatives, *Be war* and *Ensampleth*. If, like in this case, stone inscriptions speak directly to potential readers, they will create unique communications, since the reader will be a different one in each instance. Further, it remains unclear whether the reader will adhere to the inscription since the addressee can either decide to act in accordance with the given instructions or against them.

Remarkably, the rhyme scheme of the inscription, which consists of rhyming couplets, is an intrinsic part of the narration since the narrative frame announcing the content of the inscription (ending on *seiden this*) rhymes with the first line of the inscription *himself, Iphis*. Lines between narrative frame and narrated inscription are blurred; there is no clear separation. Poetry and inscriptions are closely connected in this passage

as similar forms of practice. Writing poetry equals making an inscription, a more powerful practice than writing on paper because it is the expression of one sovereign voice permanently speaking; there is no equivalent answer to an inscription, effective because it is both monophonic and material.²²

The example from *Confessio Amantis* shows us that stone inscriptions do not have to be either informative-descriptive or appellative-prescriptive; they can, indeed, be both. Additionally, even though tomb inscriptions are fairly common in medieval literature, stone inscriptions can be found on other objects, or simply rocks, as well. In the alliterative poem *Bernardus de cura famularis*, Thomas à Becket (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 until 1170) discovers, during his exilic travels in southern France, the foundation of a tower whose construction has not been finished.²³ He is told that the workers had discovered a stone inscription containing a threatening message:

<i>Thai fand A fayr letter on A stone fast,</i>	They found a fair letter inscribed in a stone
<i>That it wonderrede all the workmen that</i>	That it amazed all the workmen that [worked on
<i>the werk wrought,</i>	<i>the tower],</i>
<i>It sayd, "masterles men, yhe this tour make,</i>	It said, "Masterless men, ye [who] this tower make,
<i>A Bayre sall come out of Berttane wytht so</i>	A Boar shall come out of Britain with so broad
<i>brode tuskis,</i>	<i>tusks,</i>
<i>He shall travyll up yhour towre, and your</i>	And he shall assault your tower, and your town
<i>town ther efter,</i>	<i>thereafter,</i>
<i>And dycht his den in the derrest place that</i>	And dig his den in the dearest place that King
<i>ever aucht kynge charles".</i>	<i>Charles ever possessed".</i>

(47–52)

The portentous inscription causes the workers to stop their work in fear. The text continues: *This foulkes had ferly theroff, and the freke fechede* ("these men were amazed by it and fetched the great man", 53). The workers therefore act in accordance with the inscribed prophecy. The inscription speaks directly to its targeted readers, namely the workers, calling them *masterles men*. Through spatial proximity and the use of the possessive pronouns, it is clear which tower and town is meant. There is one more particularity, though, that stands out, which is the use of the future auxiliary *shall* (including its variant *sall*). The use of this verb in this context is, without doubt, a temporally deictic expression with future reference and prophetic function. Therefore, the category of *temporal deixis* completes the above list of different types of deictic expressions. It refers to "the orientation or position of the referent of actions and events in time [...] [and] can be marked through tense, encoded on the verb with affixes, or expressed in an independent morpheme".²⁴ It is surprising and somewhat

²² Lieb/Wagner 2017, 24.

²³ *Fragment of a poem containing Thomas à Becket's prophecies* (1870), cf. Coote 2000, 130f.

²⁴ Finegan 2008, 195.

paradoxical, though, that the perpetual function of stone inscriptions can be reversed by temporal deixis since it nullifies its eternal validity once the announced event has come true. In this case, we actually have textual evidence that stone is not always the most durable material to carry an inscription since the text says that Thomas à Becket *kest the stone in the watter, & bad it waa worche* (“he cast the stone in the water and bade its waves [do their] work”, 55).

The tombstones in Chrétien’s *Lancelot ou Le chevalier de la charrete* that foretell the graves of Gaurains, Looys and Yrains, similarly, use temporal deixis in stone inscriptions as a form of menace and obscure prophecy.

*Li chevaliers après le moine
Antre et voit les plus beles tonbes
Qu’an poïst trover jusqu’a Donbes
Ne de la jusqu’a Panpelune.
Et s’avoit letres sor chascune,
Qui les nons de ceus devoient
Qui dedanz les tonbes giroient.
Et il meïsmes tire a tire
Comança les letres a lire,
Et trova: Ci girra Gauvains,
Ci Looys et ci Yvains.
(1868–1874).*

The knight enters the cemetery after the monk
and sees the most beautiful graves
that they could find until the Dombes
and from there to Pamplona,
and on every single one there were letters
that formed the names of those
that would be in the graves.
And he began, one after the other,
to read the letters
and he found: Here will rest Gauvain,
Here Looys and here Yvain.

Once these characters are actually dead, the tombstones will lose their significance due to the future tense of the verb *girra*. In literature, though, and especially in the narrative moments the future irrelevance of such stone inscriptions seems to be bracketed. The function of admonisher and deliverer of a threat is much more significant at that specific narrative point than their possible outdated existence in the future of the narrative frame. But bearing this in mind, the endurance of stone inscriptions including future dates, simultaneously imply that at one time in the future they lose their original function, temporal significance and use.

In conclusion, stone inscriptions tend to be characterised by a combination of resistant material, heightened immobility due to its weight and linguistic content, including significant deictic references. Stone presents an enigma to the potential reader which needs to be solved so not just the past but the future can be understood. The ancient influencer has a historic message to deliver and wants the reader to take action.

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