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# A Multidisciplinary View on Material Text Cultures

## Editor's Preface

Generously funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 933 “Material Text Cultures: Materiality and Presence of Writing in Nontypographic Societies” was established at Heidelberg University in 2011, in order to promote interdisciplinary research on the material and topological settings of writing in nontypographic societies and the social practices of reception presumably prompted by these settings. Since then, operating within a theoretical framework specifically created for this purpose<sup>1</sup> and using an innovative descriptive vocabulary,<sup>2</sup> researchers from more than 20 disciplines of the Humanities have been able to shed new light on how writing was conceptualized, materialized, and contextualized in societies without widespread means of mass-producing inscribed objects, thereby contributing significantly to our understanding of the material text cultures privileged by these societies.

In order to introduce material text culture research as advanced by the CRC 933 on an international level and to provide young scholars from all over the world with the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the theoretical setting and the research strategies of the research center, the executive board of the CRC 933 decided in 2012 to stage an international competition for 6 research fellowships to be awarded to outstanding young researchers. Applications were invited for innovative, high-risk research proposals pertinent to the CRC 933's overall research scheme. The strategic aim of this decision was threefold. First of all, it was felt that a research center characterized mainly by an interdisciplinary research design should also pay attention to and promote smaller, single-disciplinary projects located outside of, but highly pertinent to the CRC 933, thus adding a multidisciplinary dimension to material text culture research. Second, there existed a curiosity as to the applicability of the theoretical premises and methodology developed and tested by the CRC 933 to research on inscribed artefacts carried out on an international level and in different research environments. Finally, it was hoped that the research made possible by the CRC's research fellowships would contribute to anchoring material text culture research as proposed by the CRC 933 within the tradition and broader context of other research strategies devoted to the material dimension of writing, such as the *filologia materiale*.

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1 Hilgert 2010; Hilgert 2014.

2 Ibid.

The present volume comprises 6 highly original studies on material text cultures in different nontypographic societies stretching from the 3rd millennium cuneiform textual record of Ancient Mesopotamia to 20th century Qur'anic boards of northern and central African provenience. Thus, the volume provides a multidisciplinary approach to material text cultures complementary to the interdisciplinary, strongly theory-grounded research scheme of the CRC 933. It illustrates that the questions and aims driving research within the CRC are valid even outside this academic environment and may generate new, exciting research on different subjects and strongly varying evidence.

The first article presented here is an excellent example of the volume's breadth of scope. In her stimulating study "Defining Collectives: Materialising and Recording the Sumerian Workforce in the Third Dynasty of Ur" (p. 5–30), Agnès Garcia-Ventura combines the formal and material analysis of cuneiform administrative records of the late 3rd millennium BCE with "gender studies and, more specifically, feminist epistemologies and postfeminism" (p. 6). Using this innovative approach, Garcia-Ventura proposes "a new way of reading work groups as they are registered in Ur III texts, paying attention to their similarities and differences and focusing less on biological or sexual ties" (p. 6).

Nathan Morello's investigation entitled "A GIŠ on a Tree: Interactions between Images and Inscriptions on Neo-Assyrian Monuments" (p. 31–68) addresses some of the most salient research problems of CRC 933, as it focuses "on the analysis of visual and semantic interactions between images and inscriptions that occur in some Neo-Assyrian monuments when part (i.e. one or more cuneiform signs) of an inscription interplays with the part of the sculpted image (i.e. one element of the image or part of it) that it crosses" (p. 31): "Is it possible to positively identify interactions of this kind? Is it possible to interpret their meaning and to understand their function (or functions)? Were they meant to be a sort of concealed 'game' within the inscription, or were they meant to be seen? And once they were seen, who was the intended recipient, the audience, of such interactions?" (p. 31). Morello is able to define a "complex technique of monument manipulation" (p. 62) that creates "a new level of perception of the work of art, one that is not only visual or literary, but a combination of the two, a combination that produces a new message" (p. 62).

In "From Voice to Papyrus to Wall: *Verschriftung* and *Verschriftlichung* in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts" (p. 69–130), Antonio J. Morales deals with the "process of emergence and development of the Pyramid Texts from their oral form to their inscription in the chambers of the late Old Kingdom pyramids of kings and queens" (p. 71). Morales argues in favor of a "re-interpretation of long-standing assumptions on the origin and development of the Pyramid Texts" (p. 119), as he presents evidence for the fact, "that the rituals represented by the Pyramid Texts were already in use by the community before theologians and editors in Heliopolis planned the monumentalization of a king's pyramid with fixed recitations" (p. 71). He furthermore suggests that "the royal corpus incorporated not only mortuary service and temple materials, but

also other types of recitations associated with magical practices, guilds' ceremonies, local festivities, and even arcana" (p. 120).

Analysing "Family Cult Foundations in the Hellenistic Age: Family and Sacred Space in a Private Religious Context" (p. 131–202), Sara Campanelli examines five inscriptions from the south-Aegean Doric area with a view to "an aspect that has hardly been touched on in studies on this topic, namely, the physical spaces as an integral part of the foundation system" (p. 133). Campanelli attempts to "look more specifically into how the spaces were meant to be used in material and conceptual terms and to see how they contributed to defining group identity" (p. 133), in order to show "how and to what extent inscriptions can be used as sources for reconstructing the architectural layout of places known only from epigraphic records" (p. 134). As one result of her investigation, Campanelli concludes that "in terms of family self-preservation, a foundation might have been intended to ensure the legitimate transmission of the inheritance under the aegis of the 'ancestral' gods and family heroes. This is all the more likely if one considers that the cult places were themselves an integral part of family assets and were used in most cases as sources of income" (p. 193f.).

Another research area of significant importance for the CRC 933 is covered by Flavia Manservigi's and Melania Mezzetti's study on "The Didyma Inscription: Between Legislation and Palaeography" (p. 203–242). Based on an inscription found in the town of Didyma (Caria) in 1991 and containing a rescript of Justinian I dated to 533 CE, the authors' aim is "to investigate the shift from a majuscule to a minuscule writing system in the Roman world, which started in the 3rd century A.D." (p. 203). Carrying out a scrupulous paleographic analysis, Manservigi and Mezzetti are able to show that "the opening lines of the *gesta praefectoria* of the Didyma inscription can be considered a missing link between the opening script of the reports of proceedings from Egypt and those of the Ravenna papyri" (p. 234). They also contend that "the main function of the inscription, that is, to show a public message to the people, failed, and [that] the writing was the bearer of another function, which was to grant authenticity to a document" (p. 235).

The volume concludes with Anastasia Grib's fascinating investigation into "The Symbolic Repertoire of the Qur'anic Board in Islamic Africa" (p. 243–278). Grib "provides a transcription of the symbolic code of the Qur'anic board based on the study of 124 samples from the Brooklyn Museum, the Gallery of Sam Fogg, the Musée du quai Branly, and other collections" (p. 243). Her aim is to decode "the symbolic language of the MCQ [i.e. Material Culture of the Qur'an] in the local Islamic centres of West and North Africa, where the most striking example of the MCQ is the Qur'anic board *allo*" (p. 244). Among the various results of the study is the observation that "in West and North Africa, one finds a semantic unity between two main types of objects belonging to the Material culture of the Qur'an: the Qur'anic manuscripts and the Qur'anic boards" (p. 277).

The research fellowships of the CRC 933 were awarded with the stipulation that each fellow gives a public lecture and teaches a seminar on their chosen research

topic at Heidelberg University. Both lectures and seminars have turned out to be highly stimulating for the CRC's researchers and created new cooperations likely to spark new material text culture research. Therefore, it is the editor's hope that the present volume is not only witness to the dynamic the CRC 933 has created within his field of investigation, but will also serve as a basis for further research on the numerous intriguing questions raised here.

## Literature

- 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 (2014), "Praxeologisch perspektivierte Artefaktanalysen des Geschriebenen. Zum heuristischen Potential der materialen Textkulturforschung", in: Friederike Elias, Albrecht Franz, Ulrich W. Weiser and Henning Murmann (eds.), *Praxeologie. Beiträge zur interdisziplinären Reichweite praxistheoretischer Ansätze in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Materiale Textkulturen 3), Berlin, 149–164.