



## Antony Eastmond, ed., Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World.

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**Antony Eastmond, ed., *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 275, ill. 73 b/w. ISBN 978-1-107-09241-9.**

As the title indicates, *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World* is about the nonverbal visual characteristics of late antique and medieval inscriptions. Unlike previous studies that typically concentrate on reading and the semantic content of writing, this volume focuses on the materiality of inscriptions and their formal, artistic and spatial strategies of communication. The broad chronological and geographical scope, from Achaemenid Persia to fourteenth-century Italy, challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and engages in a cross-cultural comparison on the role of inscriptions in forging and conveying distinct social, cultural and religious identities. By bringing together a multitude of approaches, this collection of articles not only raises awareness of the commonalities in the usage of writing as art across time and space, but it offers an inspiring array of methods in its quest to elucidate the extraordinary variety of media and contexts in which inscriptions occur and the motivations underlying their production, modification and use. This is an important contribution to the exploration of the multidimensional quality of inscriptions in the ancient and medieval world, pertinent above all in light of the widespread popularity of the use of writing, monumental or other.

Antony Eastmond's introduction offers a succinct overview of the three major threads that run through the different case studies in this volume and that control the function and meaning of inscriptions. Central to all discussions is the issue of legibility and readability, which is closely allied with its formal qualities and the typeset of the script as well as with the type of language and the question of literacy. Together, these factors establish a particular relationship with the reader/viewer and determine how an inscription is primarily confronted. Second, as material entities, inscriptions interact with and fundamentally shape their immediate physical environment. Due to their intrinsically performative nature, inscriptions thus affect how an object or monument is perceived and experienced. Finally, the functionality and performativity of inscriptions are deeply embedded in tradition and rely on the expectations and imaginations of the communities which they serve. Inscriptions react to what came before and create a new and distinctive use of writing through adaptation. This is why inscriptions are best considered within the *longue durée* of ancient epigraphy, which is exactly what this volume proposes to do.

The eleven articles explore an extraordinary diversity of contexts and types of writing. They range from royal inscriptions and the creation of national identities in the ancient Iranian world, Norman Sicily or thirteenth-century Spain to unauthorised early Christian graffiti and informal craftsmen's signatures in medieval Islamic art. The majority of articles discuss the carefully orchestrated official decorative programmes meant to strengthen cultural, religious and/or political associations in a variety of contexts like the façades of the tenth-century cathedral of Kumurdo in Georgia, pseudo-Arabic inscriptions at Hosios Loukas in

the eleventh century, the Qur'anic inscriptions of the thirteenth-century Qaratay Madrasa in the Seljuk capital of Konya or monastic inscriptions in fourteenth-century Armenia. Others examine the use and modifications of inscriptions to invent, corroborate or erase history as in the case of the monumental inscriptions of ninth- and tenth-century North Africa or early fourteenth-century Genoa.

Exemplary for the diverse themes and topics that underlie this volume as a whole is Matthew Canepa's "Inscriptions, Royal Spaces and Iranian Identity: Epigraphic Practices in Persia and the Ancient Iranian World" (Chapter 1). It outlines the broad chronological and cultural trends of appropriation, integration, departure and creative re-invention, by tracing Sasanian and early Islamic epigraphic practices back to Achaemenid and Hellenistic inscriptional conventions. The Bisotun inscription of Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE), for instance, carved into the bare rock high up on the face of a cliff in three different languages, exemplifies the issues of accessibility, legibility and readability, and illustrates the extent to which an inscription marks and shapes its natural environment and its perception. Darius I's monumental inscriptions provide the template for the manipulation of history and the proclamation of kingship in later Iranian dynasties. The structure and themes of late antique Sasanian inscriptions correspond remarkably close to those of their Achaemenid predecessors even though language and script had since changed. Sasanian Persia is a typical example of how inscriptions engage with earlier epigraphic practices and how they conveyed meaning by association.

To communicate meaning through formal qualities is particularly relevant in relation to multilingual inscriptions. They typically signify the attempt to appropriate the visual culture of the defeated communities and are often reflective of multi-ethnic and/or multi-confessional societies. The systematic use of bilingual and trilingual texts by the Norman kings of Sicily is a case in point. As Jeremy Johns argues in chapter six, the Arabic inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina are hardly legible and operate not as texts *per se* but rather as an index to the Norman monarchy and the ideology of kingship. Tom Nickson identifies similar trends in the use of multilingual epitaphs (Latin, Castilian, Arabic, Hebrew) of King Fernando III of Castile-Léon (Chapter 8). Here, the multitude of languages does not so much reflect the cosmopolitan character of thirteenth-century Castile as it is an expression of royal power and wisdom.

The choice of language and script is evidently important. Whereas the Sasanians seem to have decided in favour of their vernacular as the preferred language for monumental inscriptions (Chapter 1), in the Seljuk Qaratay Madrasa in Konya, the Qur'anic quotations were written in Arabic that was not the everyday language spoken at the time (Chapter 7). Scott Redford draws attention to the shift in the use of the script style from legible cursive script at the entrance of the Qaratay Madrasa to an interlaced *kufic*, hard to decipher, at the base of the dome. This deliberate use and placement of the inscriptions in conjunction with the overall decorative and architectural programme alludes, according to Redford, to different levels of knowledge and the idea of divine enlightenment with a

profoundly pedagogical purpose. Kufic script writing was similarly manipulated to evoke a theological meaning in the fourteenth-century decoration on the façade of the monastery of Noravank in Armenia (Chapter 9). Ioanna Rapti discusses how the aesthetic and semantic qualities of the script of its tympanum convey the mystery of the *Logos* and the divine essence.

This exploitation of inscriptions is reminiscent of what Alicia Walker describes as the ‘iconic use of writing’ (Chapter 5). Walker notes that pseudo-Arabic at Hosios Loukas was deliberately placed so as to guide the visitor around the monastic complex and to highlight areas of particular importance, thus controlling the pilgrim’s experience of the site. She argues that the pseudo-Arabic decoration in the tenth-century north church was at once a visual statement of the Byzantine triumph over Islam and of an apotropaic function. In the eleventh century, pseudo-Arabic took on a different meaning, alluding to the Christian *loci sancti* in the Holy Land now under Islamic rule. A parallel case of ‘textual icons’ is presented by Antony Eastmond in chapter four on architectural inscriptions in medieval Georgia. Here, the text was subordinate to its visuality as part of a larger decorative programme. Meaning derived primarily from its formal characteristics evocative of the mnemonic potential of Orthodox icons.

The construction of historical memory is the central topic of Stefania Gerevini’s “Written in Stone: Civic Memory and Monumental Writing in the Cathedral of San Lorenzo in Genoa” (Chapter 10). Textual and visual elements of the inscription in the nave of the cathedral of San Lorenzo work in tandem to reinforce civic identity and social unity. The epigraphs bestowed authority and truth-value to the myth of the foundation of the city of Genoa by juxtaposing the myth with the dedicatory inscription and thereby transforming it into history ‘written in stone’. A different type of re-writing history is considered by Jonathan Bloom in chapter three. The repeated erasure and alteration of architectural inscriptions in Aghlabid and Fatimid north Africa functioned as a *damnatio memoriae*. The overt blank spaces left behind draw attention to the modifications and acted as constant reminders of political change and the condemnation of previous regimes.

Informal inscriptions such as graffiti can also have a transformative effect on a monument by adding markers of a personal and intimate nature. Ann Marie Yasin explores the performative and commemorative function of graffiti in early Christian contexts (Chapter 2) that reflect and shape the experience of sacred places. Graffiti, she argues, allow an individual to become a permanent part of a holy site and its community. The surviving evidence suggests that graffiti were often concentrated around entrances and thresholds, that they inspired plagiarism and thus delineate the sacred topography and sites of popular devotion. Informal inscriptions take centre stage also in Sheila Blair’s contribution on craftsmen’s signatures in medieval Islamic art (Chapter 11). Casual signatures on ivory boxes from Umayyad Spain, for example, reflect not only workshop practices, but above all the craftsman’s status and changes thereof. The placement of informal signatures, whether in direct association with the foundation inscription, in an inconspicuous place or literally under the very foot of the patron signalled hierarchical structures, in which the artisan usually occupied the lowest order. As

always, these informal signatures form part of a larger ensemble and the context is important.

This brings me back to one of the book's fundamental premises, namely 'that inscriptions are not just disembodied words that can be studied in isolation' (p. 2). In order to account for the materiality and visibility of the inscriptions, the individual chapters indeed contain numerous photographs and drawings and the arguments are supported by extensive visual analyses. It is regrettable then that the images are only in black and white and the overall quality is not as good as one would hope in a volume that addresses the visual qualities of inscriptions and the act of viewing. However, this problem is more indicative of the nature of academic publishing than of any shortcomings of the authors. My other quibble about this book is that there is no obvious structure or partition of the volume and it is left to the reader to identify the similarities and differences and the many shared themes in the use of writing by different cultures and across time. Antony Eastmond recognises this in his excellent afterword that comes to the rescue by synthesising the vastly different papers under headings such as multilingual inscriptions, the mediation of craftsmen, inscriptions and entrances, inscriptions and authority, pseudo-writing, inscriptions and identity and, lastly, the beauty of writing. One wonders whether these could have served as the guiding principles in the form of sub-sections throughout the book. Eastmond's fundamental ideas might have served the reader better as part of the introduction.

Overall, this book covers a broad and complex topic successfully. The eleven articles are thought-provoking and engaging despite their different scopes and level of in-depth discussions. Together they provide a comprehensive and very accessible overview of the production and use of inscriptions in the late antique and medieval world. As such the volume introduces the reader to the diverse functions, contexts, subject matters and visual strategies that characterise the use of writing as art. The disciplinary and chronological range enables cross-cultural dialogue and the diversity of methods and contexts will without doubt generate new approaches to the future study of inscriptions. This book is a representative and inspiring collection of original research on the material and visual aspects of writing as art in the widest possible sense and will prove useful for students and scholars alike.

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