



56th International Congress on Medieval Studies

Kalamazoo, 10–15 May 2021

Materiality of Languages:

**Epigraphy, Manuscripts, and Writing Systems in Byzantium
and Early Islamic Near East (324–1204). Sessions I–IV.**

Organized by: [Paweł Nowakowski](#) (University of Warsaw)

[Yuliya Minets](#) (Jacksonville State University, AL)

Sponsored by: [Centre for Research on Ancient Civilizations](#) (CRAC UW)

[National Science Centre](#), Poland (NCN)



The NCN-funded project [EpIdentity](#) and the Centre for Research on Ancient Civilizations of the University of Warsaw (CRAC UW) mark their presence at the [56th International Congress on Medieval Studies](#), Kalamazoo, 10–15 May 2021 with a set of four sessions.

We bring together a group of scholars to explore the links between languages and their material and visual forms (including specific media of writing, writing instruments, scripts, etc.) in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Byzantine and early Islamic eras.

The interplay between languages and their visual representations in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages is a fascinating topic that has attracted scholarly attention in recent years but still requires further investigation. In this period, the Eastern Mediterranean witnessed greater linguistic transformations that affected the entire regions and cultures, including their popular and elite levels. Linguistic frontiers were often not a line drawn on a map, but rather extended grey areas where large numbers of people possessed some form of multilingual competence; communities speaking different languages coexisted side by side for centuries. The purpose of the sessions is to examine whether this situation led to consolidating associative links between certain languages (or their varieties) and particular types, methods, and styles of writing regarded as their “proper” or “preferred” mediums; and to what extent modern scholars can detect these links today, studying epigraphy, manuscripts, and writing systems.

Programme:

Session I: Monday, 10 May, 9:00 a.m. EDT

presider: Yuliya Minets (Jacksonville State University, AL)

papers:

1. Françoise Briquel Chatonnet (CNRS UMR 8167 Orient et Méditerranée), *To Write in Greek or to Write in Syriac: Dynamics of Languages in North Syria in Late Antiquity (keynote)*

In Northern Syria, in which one can include for Late Antiquity the southern fringe of the Anatolian plateau, both Greek and Syriac were written, often in the same places, sometimes together in bilingual inscriptions. Subject, culture and context do not seem to be in each case a leading criterion to the choice of the language. If the dynamics of the Greek language, haloed by the prestige of culture, literature and political power, seems obvious, the spread of Syriac, especially towards the West, in the region of Aleppo and Antioch, is less so. This raises the question of the different forms of Aramaic and their interactions.

2. Jimmy Daccache (Yale University), Simon Brelaud (University of California–Berkeley), Flavia Ruani (IRHT-CNRS, Paris), *Cursive vs Monumental Syriac Script: Some Reflections on Inscriptions and Graffiti from Turkey*

This paper will contribute to refine our current definitions of cursive and monumental scripts in Syriac, given that cursive script was not only used in literary evidence and in graffiti, but also in monumental inscriptions. The reflections we will be presenting derive from our collective ongoing project “Recueil des Inscriptions Syriaques de Turquie,” which aims to collect and study all Syriac inscriptions from Turkey.

They will be based in particular on the inscriptions and graffiti – some of which are hitherto unpublished – dated between the fifth and the thirteenth century gathered in the provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Mardin. We will compare the selected examples to contemporary epigraphic as well as literary documents from other regions. These analyses will allow us to retrace the evolution of the cursive writing over time and space. This will be a valuable contribution to the study of ʿEstrangēlā and Serṭā scripts, which has been the focus of an extensive scholarship since the beginning of the discipline. Our study will address questions not only about scribal practices, but also about social-historical issues related to the use of these two scripts: Did the engravers employ cursive writing in monumental inscriptions on purpose, or rather because they were illiterate and were copying a text provided by a scribe? Is a graffito always the work of an amateur, who wants to leave a mark and who is not qualified as engraver? The study of the diachronic use of Syriac cursive script will therefore highlight the social status of the engravers, their level of literacy and more generally the spread of literacy within the community.

3. General discussion

Session II: Tuesday, 11 May, 9:00 a.m. EDT

presider: Adam Łajtar (University of Warsaw)

papers:

1. Sean Leatherbury (University College Dublin), *Pilgrim Inscriptions in Late Antique Syria and Palestine: Materiality and Production*

During their visits to sacred sites, late antique pilgrims often left their mark on these holy interiors by carving, incising, or painting their names, typically paired with their prayers. These text-markers acted as traces of the pilgrims and their relatives that persisted even after the people who made them left: for example, the Latin text which the sixth-century pilgrim from Piacenza writes that he left behind on a stone couch at the site of the Wedding of Cana (John 2:1-11), memorialising the names of his parents. In modern scholarship, texts like this are often referred to under the category of “graffiti”, implying that they are somehow illicit by analogy to contemporary practices such as tagging. However, similar inscriptions at some sites appear not to have been produced by pilgrims themselves, but by groups of trained stonemasons or painters. This paper examines the carved and painted texts from two sites frequented by pilgrims of different faiths in the late antique Levant: Elijah’s Cave on Mount Carmel, which was visited by pagans or polytheists, Jews, and Christians; and the Hammat Gader baths near the Sea of Galilee. Focusing especially on the ways in which the inscriptions were embedded into the rough stone walls and smooth floors of the two sites, the paper investigates questions of visual presentation (how the inscriptions were framed and arranged) as well as production (by pilgrims or trained professionals). By considering the inscriptions not only in terms of their verbal formulae, but also in terms of their material and visual presence, and role in the ritual lives of their sites, we may get a glimpse of the inner workings of the sacred economies of pilgrim destinations, one that makes visible the often similar ways that pagans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims interacted with the physical environments of pilgrimage.

2. Paweł Nowakowski (University of Warsaw), *The Making of Multilingualism: Between Space and Speech at Khirbat al-Kursi*

The never-ending chase for bilingual texts is surely a solid basis and one of the most captivating aspects of research on ancient multilingualism. However, seemingly unconnected monolingual texts in different languages also have a great potential as long as they share the same environment: it is also the space that makes multilingualism. This assumption is particularly relevant to inscriptions (themselves often the resultant of local speech habits and formal education), and in some aspects still brings us to uncharted waters of sociolinguistic studies on Late Antiquity. In this paper, I will throw more light at this shadowy area through an inquiry into the dossier of Christian-Palestinian Aramaic and Greek inscriptions from the martyr shrine at Khirbat al-Kursi, Amman (Jordan). There, only the combined perception of dedicatory inscriptions at the head of the nave, and the chancel builds a unique cross-lingual experience, and illustrates how people of different social, religious, and family status choose one or the other language to record their dedications, how they allot specific languages to designated panels on floor mosaics, how they switch codes here and there, and how the sacred boundary of the chancel screen becomes subtly permeable while Aramaic does ‘intrude’ the nave, whereas the presbyterium area is closed to Greek.

3. Blake Lorenz (KU Leuven), *Epigraphy, Entrances, and Eschatology: A Re-Examination of the Dome of the Rock*

Within academia, the Dome of the Rock has remained a focal point of rigorous debate. The building constructed in the seventh century has seemingly defied categorization. Is it a mosque, a place of circumambulation rivaling the sacred Ka'bah in Mecca, or is it a shrine dedicated to the Islamic conquest of Christian Jerusalem? Despite the erudition advanced by scholars such as Grabar, Goldziher, Goitein, Lassner, and many others, these questions still do not have a concrete conclusion. My objective in examining this sacred space is to highlight the epigraphy in relation to geographic space, and by doing so, emphasize the eschatological significance of the building in effort to shed more light upon the enigmatic structure. By framing it in this lens, I am going to accentuate how it interacts with the time period that it was constructed in—one looming with apocalyptic expectations—and other sacred spaces within the city of Jerusalem. I argue that the Muslim builders were aware of eschatological prophecies and directly interacted with those of Jewish and Christian origin through certain architectural features. This also helps place the eschatological significance of Jerusalem within Islamic theology, which also has been at the center of much debate. And finally, the inclusion of eschatological features emphasizes the sentiments of this transformative period.

Session III: Thursday, 13 May, 9:00 a.m. EDT

presider: Paweł Nowakowski (University of Warsaw)

papers:

1. Yuliya Minets (Jacksonville State University, AL), *Language Matters, Language Does Not Matter: Reading and Writing in a Language One Does Not Understand in Monastic Settings in Late Antiquity*

The paper will focus on several hagiographical stories originated in or associated with monastic milieux of late antique Egypt and Palestine that feature peculiar episodes involving someone's reading and writing either in the language that the person performing these activities did not understand, or in the language not understood or not commonly used in his/her monastic community. Each time, a narrative story evolves around a tension created by several boundaries and transformations – cognitive boundaries between different languages; the visual distinction between different scripts; audio-visual transformations of a written text into an oral one and back. The materiality of a language expressed through a written medium (a manuscript being written or a manuscript being read) occasionally took precedence over one's thorough comprehension of the meaning of a text; in some other cases, impractical and overall frustrating experience of writing or reading in an incomprehensible language, if patiently carried on, still became an extremely valuable form of ascetic devotion. In chapter 5.39 of his *Institutions*, Cassian tells a story about a certain brother Simeon from Italy, who came to a monastery in Egypt. He wanted to earn his bread by the labor of his hands, but he did not know any craft, nor did he speak any Greek. However, he had good handwriting skills in Latin, so one of the elders pretended that he needed a copy of the Epistles in Latin. Simeon worked painstakingly on the manuscript throughout the entire year. By the end, the manuscript "was not of the slightest use," being written in Latin in a community where no one knew the language. Yet Cassian underlined that Simeon's ignorance of Greek, as well as his fellow monks' unfamiliarity with Latin, played absolutely no role in the entire endeavor, which benefited both parties and in which everyone revealed their virtues and care for the communal well-being. Similarly, one of the letters of Barsanuphius (d. c.540), an ascetic native of Egypt who lived in seclusion near the city of Gaza in Palestine, reveals a similar attitude. *Letter 228* was a response to a certain monk who was greatly frustrated about his Greek readings for he was not able to understand the language. The answer of the great hermit was kind, but somewhat restrained in terms of promising immediate help. He encouraged the monk to just keep doing what he did, and God may grant what is beneficial for his soul. Since, as Barsanuphius explained, most books are written in Greek, it would be better for the monk to learn and read them as best as he could, whether he understood them or not, and this would eventually prove helpful for advancing his language skills. Similarly to the episode from Cassian's *Institutes* above, Barsanuphius' response implies that, at the end of the day, the monk's actual understanding of what Greek means is not so important for his salvation and spiritual well-being as his diligent work to the glory of God. These episodes are just two examples among a number of other similar hagiographical stories that illustrate various less-known sentiments and sensitivities about language materiality, orality, comprehensibility, and spiritual value that were spread in monastic milieux of late antique Egypt and Palestine and that this paper will explore.

2. Peter Kruschwitz (University of Vienna), *Re-thinking Inscribed Roman Poetry as a Form of Decorative Art*

Significant research has been carried out over the last couple of decades to investigate forms of text layout in the so-called *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*. In that, the textual nature of inscribed Roman verse was given prominence and importance, making verse inscriptions texts that happened to be preserved on, and designed for, monumental contexts. Without a doubt, this approach has its great merits and has yielded important insights that will shape future directions of *Carmina Epigraphica* research for the foreseeable future. There is a different way of thinking about verse inscriptions, however, and this involves putting less emphasis on the actual text and its message(s): rather than understanding verse inscriptions as poems that happen to be sculpted, it seems worth asking: could verse inscriptions be seen as sculpture that happens to consist of words (rather than images)? Could verse inscriptions be understood e. g. (but not exclusively) as the poor man's sculpted decoration in funerary contexts? Following a brief overview of the status quaestionis, this paper proposes to study a selection of cases, from the classical to the late antique period that would suggest that such a re-evaluation is, if not relevant in all cases, at least relevant to some – thus opening up a number of avenues for further research on the way in which we may (re-)conceptualise Roman poetry, especially for, but not restricted to, its inscribed manifestations. Finally, a number of illustrative cases of clear text-image interaction will be adduced to demonstrate the way in which sculpted text had been understood as textual sculpture.

3. Erene Rafik Morcos (Princeton University), *An Introduction to and Overview of The Greco-Latin Psalter*

The Greco-Latin Psalter appears to be the oldest witness of the multilingual Psalter and enjoyed an unbroken tradition from Late Antiquity to the age of Humanism. While individual Greco-Latin Psalters may have been studied isolated from their multilingual context, the collective sub-genre has yet to be inventoried and surveyed as a whole. This paper will offer an introduction to the Greco-Latin Psalter, beginning with a brief historical trajectory that traces its evolution, change, and persistence from the 7th century into the 13th century and beyond. As books and book-making evolved into the 12th century, the multilingual Psalter begins to reveal tensions due to the accommodation of two separate codicological systems. Greek and Latin writing systems at this time separately construct and adhere to a distinctive decorative syntax. Their association encumbers the parallelism rigorously maintained between the two texts, and the manner in which the juxtaposition of Greek and Latin becomes a challenge for the architecture of the page yields informative data on the respective rules of textual ornamentation. My paper will thus capitalize on the fruitful opportunity these multilingual Psalters offer to examine the visual operation of two languages sharing a single space. The Psalter is a text inherently multilingual in its ambition. It is structured to transcend time, circumstance, and geography to embody the universal first-person-singular in which it is performed. Although the extant examples are located primarily outside of the Eastern Mediterranean and overstep the time period of the proposed sessions, the Greco-Latin Psalter offers a remarkable expression of medieval Hellenism and extension of the Greek linguistic frontier in a study set of over thirty examples. The sub-genre stimulates questions about the copying, ornamentation, and reading of text that I hope would benefit from the discussion offered by those actively engaged in questions of multilingualism and its visibility across media.

Session IV: Friday, 14 May, 9:00 a.m. EDT

presider: Jimmy Daccache (Yale University)

papers:

1. Adam Łajtar (University of Warsaw), *The Literacy of Christian Nubia: Three Languages, One Script*

Nubia, the southern neighbour of Egypt, stretched along the middle Nile Valley, was Christian in a period corresponding roughly with the European Middle Ages. Christian Nubia had a rich literary culture, testimony to which is a collection of over four thousand items registered in the online Database of Medieval Nubian Texts. They were executed in both durable and non-durable writing materials, and include a large variety of textual genres, to wit: literary works (Biblical, apocryphal, Patristic, ascetic, homiletic, hagiographic, liturgical), pious invocations and prayers, magic spells, epitaphs, building and commemorative inscriptions, acclamations, captions of paintings, visitors' inscriptions in cult places, school exercises, catalogues and registers, legal documents, letters, signatures and tags. This rich and variegated dossier comprises texts in all the three languages which were used in written communication in Christian Nubia: Greek, Sahidic Coptic, and Old Nubian. They are attested in largely overlapping contexts, with only some

chronological variations (Old Nubian rises when Coptic decreases). All three of them were recorded with the same alphabet and the same type of script (either round epigraphic majuscules or ogival inclined majuscule of Nubian type), with the result that the texts are not identifiable linguistically solely on the basis of their graphic form. The paper aims in presenting some particularly clear examples of this uniformity of script and tries to find some explanation for it.

2. Agata Deptuła (University of Warsaw), *Keeping Books on Walls. Cases of Copying Manuscript Leaves onto the Walls in Medieval Nubia*

Among the inscriptions discovered in the Lower Church in Banganarti one group of texts stands out significantly. Those are five inscriptions comprising Greek liturgical hymns executed within one space. However, more remarkable than their content is the form: they are written in book-hand, the sloping majuscule, with an extraordinary size of the letters, which height oscillates between approximately 0.5 and 0.7 cm. Such small letters are practically impossible to read in a dark room, texts written this way can normally be found in manuscripts. Additionally, certain extra elements, such as the layout and the passages which correspond to rubrics providing information about the genres and melody, indicate that they could be excerpts of liturgical books transferred directly onto the walls. Another well-known example of the practice of copying book fragments to walls are Coptic texts discovered inside Anchorite's Grotto in Faras written in a very regular Biblical majuscule in square and oval decorated compartments. Although, most probably, there were some local scriptoria in Nubia where books could have been manufactured, paleography and the layout of the inscriptions under consideration imply that they could have been copied from imported manuscripts and, therefore, could be visual manifestations of the social prestige resulting from the possession of a valuable book. Most likely in both cases the texts were merely symbolic in function. Thus the questions arise: what was the motive for such a practice? Was it the same in both cases? Are those isolated examples or a part of a local tradition, yet to be investigated?

3. Fokelien Kootstra (Ghent University), *This Letter of Mine. Scribal Consensus on Paleographic and Orthographic Variation in the Arabic Qurra Papyri*

The Arabic Qurra papyri are a collection of about 70 official letters written on behalf of Qurra bin Sharik who was the governor of Egypt between 709 and 715 AD (e.g. Becker 1906; Grohmann 1934; Abbott 1938). Besides Arabic, this trilingual corpus contains Greek and Coptic documents (Richter 2016). The present contribution will focus on the orthographic and paleographic features of the Arabic material. It will consider usage patterns of paleographic and orthographic variation to investigate the role of these visual elements of the documents in scribal consensus found in this corpus. The Qurra documents are written in a careful official hand, characterized by the relatively large size and wide spacing of the letters (Abbott 1938, 36; Becker 1906, 25). The coherence of the corpus and its professional character make it ideal to investigate if and how this bureaucratic office contributed to the formation of unified scribal practice. Despite their official character, the Qurra papyri display a lot of internal variation. Some of this variation is found in orthographic features such as dotting practice (e.g. q dotted above or below the letter (Abbott 1938, 38; Kaplony 2008)) and paleographic features (shape of final y, shape of final n on the word bin (Becker 1906, 26)). Some of these variants seem to depend on the training or preference of the individual scribe (e.g. the dotting of the q) or to vary freely. In other cases, there seems to be a clear preference for certain forms when used in high frequency words or phrases (e.g. back looping y on kitābī 'my letter'). This may suggest that there was not so much a proscriptive scribal register, but that any kind of emerging uniformity that we see in this early corpus is more of a usage-based convergence of high frequency forms and formulae.

4. Tomasz Barański (University of Warsaw), *The Introduction of Arabic in the Fiscal Administration of Umayyad Egypt: New Thoughts on the Earliest Dated Papyri*

After the Muslim conquest of Egypt, the new rulers managed to make use of its fertile land. At first they governed Egypt wisely relying on the old structures. They generated an enormous amount of paperwork, which was still executed in Greek though with a growing popularity of the Coptic language. It is well illustrated in the Flavius Pappas archive, which offers an insight into the world of a Christian pagarch functioning in the first half-century of the new political reality. The Arabic language, however, was immediately brought to Egypt with the conquering army as exemplified by two papyri dated to 22 AH (642-3 AD). Nevertheless, Arabic seems to be used on an ad hoc basis there and it is difficult to assess its reception until the early 8th century. At that moment the process of Arabisation is well illuminated by the Qurra papyri. A few bilingual documents were written earlier on behalf of the governor 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Marwān (in office 685-705). They seem to be an outcome of the political propaganda of the Marwanids, whom historiographic sources give priority in regard to the Arabization of conquered countries. It is questionable if such a planned manifestation of Arabic language in Egyptian fiscal administration may be found in earlier papyri. Two bilingual tax receipts issued by 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī 'Awf seem to be the only examples of

fiscal documents using Arabic language in pre-Marwanid Egypt. In my paper, however, I will present a new reading of the dates preserved in these Arabic-Greek documents (SB XVIII 13771 and SPP VIII 1198), which shows that they were written in the early 8th century. Moreover, I will argue that it is highly doubtful that Arabic was engaged in standard procedures of the fiscal administration in Egypt before the time of the first Marwanids' reforms.