

Literacy in Antiquity and the Medieval Ages: What Inscriptions and Manuscripts Can Tell Us

Roundtable Discussion
Monday, August 3, 2015, 2-6 pm
Universitätsbibliothek (Plöck 107-109), Rundes Zimmer

Participants (Speakers):

Ulrike EHMIG (Institut für Papyrologie, Heidelberg)
Enno GIELE (Institut für Sinologie, Heidelberg)
MIYAKE Kiyoshi (Institute for Research in Humanities/Jinbunken, Kyoto)
Klaus OSHEMA (Historisches Seminar, Heidelberg)
Joachim Friedrich QUACK (Institut für Ägyptologie, Heidelberg)
Nicholas VOGT (Institut für Sinologie, Heidelberg)

Audience seating capacity: 20-30 max., please note that SFB members & invited individuals are prioritized in case of shortage of seats.

Schedule:

14:00-14:15	Welcome and introduction (Giele)
14:15-15:00	Stimulus paper: <i>Literacy and Oral Communication in Early China. A View From the Excavated Manuscripts of the Qin and Han Periods</i> (Miyake)
Short break	
15:15-15:45	Disciplinary perspectives 1: Ancient Egypt (Quack)
15:45-16:15	Disciplinary perspectives 2: Ancient Rome (Ehmig)
Short break	
16:30-16:45	Disciplinary perspectives 3: Ancient Chinese Inscriptions (Vogt)
16:45-17:15	Disciplinary perspectives 4: European Middle Ages (Oschema)
17:15-18:00	General discussion

Topic:

Literacy in premodern societies is not exactly an understudied topic—witness Bowman & Woolf (1994) complaining about an “interdisciplinary maelstrom of literacy studies”. But then, it is also not exactly a closed case—witness the reprint and revision history of Clanchy (¹1979, ²1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 [2x!], ³2012). Ironically, while the pioneers of literacy studies erred on the side of narrow cultural and social determinism, a tendency that has now given way to a pointed pluralism of “literacies” (see Johnson & Parker 2009 referencing Harris 1989), at least some of them (esp. Goody 1968; Ong 1982) were also truly, if perhaps naively, global in their approach (and their claims). Most recent studies on the other hand, even where they treat of a larger culture area, such as the Mediterranean (Carr 2005; Lomas 2007;) or the whole of Europe (McKitterick 1990) seem to have lost that audacity. Now that the disciplinary literacy studies as well have become a veritable “maelstrom” (cf. Thomas 1992 for the Greek, Beard et al. 1991 for the Roman world; Wilcke 2000 and Charpin 2008 for Babylon and Assyria; Quack 2006 as well as, still, Baines 1983 for Egypt; Li & Branner 2011 for

the early Chinese, Lurie 2011 for the early Japanese realms; Rollsten 2011 and Schmidt 2015 for ancient Israel; Zilmer 2012 for the runic remains of Scandinavia and Russia; Keller 1992 for medieval Europe and Mostert 2014 specifically for the medieval cities, to name just a few in addition to the above-cited), it seems opportune to re-address more generic questions on the basis of a supposedly much advanced knowledge about actual material witnesses of ancient and medieval literacy as well as a much broader experience in approaches to the subject. This pertains to the research framework of the SFB 933 in particular.

To do so, it will be crucial to understand how the basic terms, such as "writing", "reading", "literacy", etc. are defined in each discipline. For some disciplines or periods it might make sense to distinguish glottographic from semasiographic writing, to others this may appear to be a very foreign idea. In some societies and cultures bilingualism, diglossia (or even triglossia), and digraphia are essential factors (cf. Quack & de Voogt 2012). Also, what exactly the disciplines focus on, when they investigate "literacy"--the elite, the masses, the rate, the quality, the tools, the acquisition, the individual skill, the societal state, the political uses, the cultural function, the development *à la longue durée*, the nature of the writing system, etc.--is bound to be contingent upon the sources available, but also upon the disciplinary traditions. But while it is important to be aware of systematic disciplinary differences and accidental commonalities, the much more important and practical next step is to ask how we can possibly both diversify and hone our approach to premodern literacy, especially on the basis of inscriptions and manuscripts, as well as through theoretical considerations, and whether or not a comparison of disciplines and sources will uncover *systematic* commonalities that will allow us to establish "literacy", beyond its being mired in specific cultures and languages, as also a universal phenomenon of humanity.

It is hoped that the format of the roundtable discussion, with only brief input in the form of tales of disciplinary traditions as well as texts and pictures of inscriptions and manuscripts presented by representatives of different disciplines and rather copious time for discussion will be a fruitful way to answer these questions.

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- Rollsten, Christopher A.: *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age*, Leiden, 2011.
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