

BOOK REVIEW

Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World. Edited by ANTONY EASTMOND. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. P. xvii + 261. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-107-09241-9.

The eleven papers in this volume focus upon the physicality, appearance, and materiality of inscriptions in order to highlight non-verbal modes of epigraphic communication. They represent a remarkably broad chronological and spatial range—from fourth-century Italy to fourteenth-century Armenia and from Seville to the Iranian plateau—but their authors share a common interest in the ways that inscribing individuals and groups exploited monumental writing to convey meanings beyond the verbal content of the words they inscribed. Too often historians and epigraphers have ignored the visual and contextual features of inscriptions or subordinated them to analyses aimed at securing accurate readings or mining texts for historical data, a feature of traditional epigraphy evident in the tendency of nineteenth- and twentieth-century corpora to offer minimal information beyond the presentation of transcribed texts. For the authors in this volume, the “art” of an inscription is a no less crucial signifier of “meaning” than the words chosen for display. The choices made by inscribers range from the formal—script, letter size, legibility, and readability—to the material—walls, floors, mosaic, and marble. Moreover, as every inscription is (or once was) part of a larger physical and topographic field—in a church, in a cemetery, or on a mountainside—these papers emphasize the duty of cultural historians to take account of context in their attempts to interpret an inscription’s agenda. In short, this volume carries forward the recently arrived at realizations that inscriptions were always viewed as well as read, that every individual inscription was in dialogue with earlier and contemporary inscriptions, and that, as physical and enduring entities, inscriptions were particularly powerful sites of cultural memory.

Several papers focus on the role of inscriptions within charged political or dynastic contexts. Following Antony Eastmond’s introduction, summarized above, *Viewing Inscriptions* opens with Matthew Canepa’s survey of the epigraphic habits of the Persian and Seleucid monarchs—from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian era (“Inscriptions, Royal Spaces and Iranian Identity: Epigraphic

Practices in Persia and the Ancient Iranian World”). Canepa reveals how, despite linguistic and graphic divides, particular royal sites were reutilized over time by succeeding regimes—Persian, Macedonian, and Parthian—to announce and engage both continuity and discontinuity with previous conceptions of rulership and ritual. Though not inattentive to the texts themselves, Canepa’s focus is often upon the ways in which the accumulation of inscriptions in environments that eventually included texts no longer readable “altered the visual impact and cultural meaning of a site or structure” (29).

In parallel fashion, Jonathan Bloom’s “Erasure and Memory: Aghlabid and Fatimid Inscriptions in North Africa” examines the evidence for the erasure and replacement of dedicatory and foundational inscriptions in buildings, primarily mosques, in tenth- and eleventh-century Tunisia during the Aghlabid and Fatimid periods. As much of Bloom’s evidence is inaccessible or lost, his argument is often speculative, but he identifies purposeful or unintentional over-building and complete or partial obliteration as the primary mechanisms. The latter case in particular left a visual reminder of the new dynasty’s authority.

Questions of readability are also central to Jeremy Johns’ “Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina: Performativity, Audience, Legibility and Illegibility.” Johns’ paper works well with both Canepa’s and Alicia Walker’s (see below) for, like Canepa’s Iranian setting, twelfth-century Sicily was a multilingual environment and, similarly to Walker’s Hosios Loukas in Greece, the largely illegible Arabic (or pseudo-Arabic) inscribed in the Cappella Palatina operated primarily as a visual not literary signifier, one whereby the Norman kings of Sicily (optimistically) advertised their mastery of all “aspects of Arab and Islamic culture” (143).

In other papers, religious questions dominate. In “Prayers on Site: The Materiality of Devotional Graffiti and the Production of Early Christian Sacred Space,” Ann Marie Yasin interrogates two complementary features of graffiti inscribed at early Christian shrines. On the one hand such graffiti, she observes, give an enduring material form to otherwise ephemeral acts of devotion—prayer or a request for intercession—underscoring and embodying the performativity of pilgrimage and its devotional gestures while facilitating the pilgrim’s inclusion in a kind of virtual community of likeminded devotees. On the other hand, the accumulation of graffiti at specific spots in churches and shrines transforms space, amplifying the sacred environment, influencing perception, and thereby encouraging devotional imitation. Like graffiti at a shrine, inscriptions might accumulate on the walls of a church over time.

Antony Eastmond's "Textual Icons: Viewing Inscriptions in Medieval Georgia" considers this phenomenon at the tenth-century cathedral of Kumurdo. While implicitly reinforcing a number of Yasin's observations, Eastmond highlights the power exercised by blocks of text in which readability was less important than visual impact. Although such texts, Eastmond suggests, were "designed to look as if they can be read" (82) and were, in fact, readable for some viewers, by virtue of their artistic qualities, length, or cumulative mass alone they engendered piety and prayer.

In her contribution to the volume, Alicia Walker examines the pseudo-Arabic inscriptions at the monastery of Hosios Loukas in Phokis, Greece, inscriptions roughly contemporary with the Georgian texts studied by Eastmond. Walker convincingly argues that these motifs were not mere decorative elements but rather, with changing impact over time, significant influences upon the visitor's experience of the two churches on the site. If in the earlier north church they helped to direct the "pilgrim's path," to stimulate recall of the recent Byzantine conquest of Crete, and to lay down an apotropaic boundary, in the later south church they evoked the Muslim dominated Holy Land and reminded Christian viewers of their duty "to challenge this subjugation" (119).

In the thirteenth-century Qaratay Madrasa at Konya, the "pathways" indicated by that building's complex epigraphic program—Scot Redford argues in "Intercession and Succession, Enlightenment and Reflection"—only clarify after persistent attention and re-reading. In the madrasa's program Redford finds a coded mystical theological treatise, composed by the madrasa's patron (Jalal al-Din Qaratay) and its craftsman, that in part highlighted the succession of prophets and caliphs in order to place the ancient Christianity of Anatolia's population, now subjects of a Seljuk sultan, within a "continuum" of religious practice (149).

The role of inscriptions within multicultural societies is a further thread connecting many of these papers. Tom Nickson's "Remembering Ferdinand: Multilingualism in Medieval Iberia" epitomizes this issue. Nickson posits that the multilingual epitaphs (Latin, Castilian, Arabic, and Hebrew) installed at the tomb of Fernando III (d. 1252) in Seville—whether they were read or simply viewed—were intended to project an "image" of both "sapiential kingship" and multicultural harmony, an image that was actually incongruous with the political and social realities of thirteenth-century Castile.

Ioanna Rapti's "Displaying the Word: Words as Visual Signs in the Armenian Architectural Decoration of the Monastery of Noravank" also treats inscrip-

tions in a moment of cultural assimilation, though in this case the emphasis is on multi-scripturalism not multilingualism. Rapti's attention is drawn to the iconography and epigraphy of the tympana of the monastic church at Noravank', where she identifies the use of an Islamic decorative—or kufic—script as a conscious artistic and semantic choice intended both to reinforce the theological messages of the tympana and to speak positively of the place of Armenian culture within the Mongol empire.

As noted by Eastmond in his Afterword (254), issues of identity are at stake in all the volume's papers, but they are explicit in Stefania Gerevini's "Written in Stone: Civic Memory and Monumental Writing in the Cathedral of San Lorenzo in Genoa," which highlights a set of fourteenth-century Latin texts inscribed there. Gerevini shows how these texts, set out in elegant Gothic script, mingled advertisement and authentication of the city's mythic origins with contemporary events and individuals in order to promote civic solidarity amid crisis. To achieve their ends, the civic authorities relied on the visual properties of length, location, and legibility as much as the verbal content of the texts they inscribed.

Identity of a different stripe is foregrounded in Sheila Blair's study of informal craftsmen's signatures: "Place, Space and Style: Craftsmen's Signatures in Medieval Islamic Art." Her survey reveals the tendency of craftsmen to "sign" ivory boxes, lamps, and manuscripts in inconspicuous places—often (literally) under the feet of their patrons—in order to acknowledge visually their position of servitude while simultaneously proclaiming their status as members of a caliphal or royal workshop.

Viewing Inscriptions offers a set of provocative and thematically integrated essays. Though the inevitable lack of contemporary evidence of reception—a facet of the problem only explicitly acknowledged by Jeremy Johns—forces reliance on assumption and comparison, the volume's common methods and cross-cultural analyses provide a durable analytic framework. None of the papers in this volume deal directly with the ancient Greco-Roman world, but their exposition of the roles played by the visual as well as textual dimensions of inscriptions and of the significance of visual as well as textual literacy will intersect with the interests of many ancient historians and classicists.

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