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Rebecca Van Hove

REFERENCES

Andrej PETROVIC, Ivana PETROVIC, Edmund THOMAS (dir.), *The Materiality of Text. Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2018. 1 vol. 16 × 24 cm, xviii+416 p. (*Brill Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy*, 11). ISBN : 978-90-04-37943-5.

- 1 Starting out from the presumption that inscriptions are texts indissolubly connected to the physical objects on which they are written, this collection of essays aims to provide a multi-disciplinary perspective on the physical and material aspects of writing in antiquity. It argues that there is a need to ‘increase modern sensibilities to material aspects of our texts which are often elided in modern printed editions’. This call is not new: recognition of the importance of the materiality of texts for our understanding of ancient writings has grown steadily in recent years, as Andrej Petrovic also discusses in his fine introduction to the volume. What is new, however, is that this volume puts such preaching into practice: its strength and innovation lies in showcasing how, concretely, the materiality of ancient texts can actually be studied, through a wide range of exciting and fascinating case studies¹.
- 2 Following Petrovic’s introduction, the book is divided into two parts: the shorter first one examines some of the concepts underlying material forms of epigraphic writing, as well as its cultural significance. The second part, which makes up the bulk of the volume, provides case studies of texts in specific contexts and is divided into three subsections, according to disciplinary perspectives: epigraphic spaces, literary spaces, and architectural spaces.
- 3 In Part 1, Athena Kirk offers an important examination of the notion of ἐπιγραφή in Classical Greece. She argues that ἐπιγραφή refers not to all inscribed texts but only to those which do not lead a separate life as an utterance or performance: it is a text ‘by definition unuttered and physical’. An ἐπιγραφή, Kirk asserts, can be understood as a

stamp: it is inextricably linked to its object, a message incomplete without medium. Through an analysis of Herodotus' approach to inscriptions, Kirk argues that taking seriously this distinction utterance/non-utterance, instead of relying solely on distinctions we consider important (such as for example copy/original, poetry/prose, or accurate/inaccurate), can help us better understand ancient writing about writing. Kirk's essay is followed by Alexei Zadorojnyi's analysis of the portrayal of epigraphic writing in imperial Greek literature, which emphasizes the aesthetic and political prestige of monumental inscriptions, as well as the vulnerability that inevitably comes with such physicality.

- 4 In Part 2, Joseph Day opens the subsection on 'epigraphic spaces' with an intriguing examination of the 'spatial dynamics' of dedications at major Greek sanctuaries, in particular Delphi and Olympia. Valentina Garulli's chapter is largely a catalogue of occurrences in Greek verse inscriptions of three lectional signs, used to indicate breaks in the text. The article briefly compares the use of these signs in epigraphy and papyri, but it is unfortunate that some of the interesting questions raised about the relationship between signs on handwritten documents and in epigraphical writing are not further explored. Peter Rhodes' contribution similarly catalogues examples of the phenomenon studied without offering much analysis of what exactly the role of physical materiality is: he focuses on erasures in Greek public documents and highlights the variety of types of erasures found. The subsection on 'literary spaces' commences with a chapter by Donald Lavigne, who scrutinises how Greek epigrammatic monuments make use of their physical materiality to create a site-specific performance which allows the monument to construct authority and *kleos* in a manner similar to Archaic institutionalized poetic performances. Michael Tueller examines the role and presentation of women — as subjects and writers — in the story of Greek epigram's engagement with the writing process itself. Stephen Heyworth pushes forward in time, to relate the variety of materials by which Latin elegists, in particular Propertius, portray the writing and preservation of their texts.
- 5 The subsection on 'architectural spaces' includes a contribution by Ioannis Mylonopoulos, which discusses the curious unwillingness of the Greeks to include prominent dedicatory inscriptions on their sacred architecture. Abigail Graham re-evaluates 'duplicate' inscriptions at Aphrodisias and argues convincingly that the notion of 'copies' is unhelpful, as it implies there is an original inscription of which others are derived, which is not always the case. Furthermore, such terms also carry with them relative value judgements, as if an original is always more authoritative than a 'duplicate'. Fanny Opdenhoff, similarly to Graham, focuses on the spatial context of inscriptions, in this case graffiti and dipinti from public wall surfaces at Pompei. Like Day's 'spatial dynamics', Opdenhoff studies the relationship of inscriptions with each other, as well as with the space they occupied. She argues that these wall surfaces functioned as billboards, and that the coexistence of different electoral and event advertisements, added at different times, all effected how such spaces were perceived by viewers. Ida Östenberg contributes a fascinating article on the well-known Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae*. She takes a novel approach by scrutinising not the intent and purpose of the practice, but rather its effects: the 'material message of the altered texts themselves and their interaction with their viewers'. Focusing on the physical material of the erased inscriptions, Östenberg argues memory sanctions are complex processes that cannot be bound into a single comprehensive interpretation. Rather, their enactment is influenced by factors such as the specific context of an inscription,

or the material of the inscribed document itself. Contrasting to Östenberg's focus on the audience's point of view, is Katharina Bolle's analysis of two dedications set up in the Forum baths in Ostia. Bolle analyses how the exact placement of these inscriptions, as well as their size, letter-design, and shape, are indicators of the motivations and intentions of the dedicators. The varied physical presentation of the dedications complements the different strategies of self-representation which we can recognize also in the *content* of these texts. Wrapping up the volume, Sean Leatherbury looks at the materiality and monumentality of *tabula ansata*, 'the tablet-with-handles' form used to frame inscriptions, in Christian contexts in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. He uncovers the symbolism attached to the form, which allowed artists and patrons to draw on a web of associative meanings, and examines how artists used color and shape in mosaics to challenge the two-dimensionality of their medium.

- 6 Fitting with this journal's interests, I focus in the rest of my review on the volume's contribution to, and relevance for, the study of ancient Greek religion. Two chapters in particular centre on the materiality of inscriptions in a religious context: Day's study of the Spartan, Athenian and Arcadian dedications in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi uncovers the 'cooperative' and 'competitive' conversations found there between statues and inscriptions, with sanctuary visitors as active participants in these conversations. Through careful spatial positioning, intertextual allusions, or oppositely through conscious deviance from the formulaic norm, inscriptions engaged and communicated with each other, thereby creating a whole greater than its parts. Mylonopoulos' article equally makes an important contribution to the study of sacred space. Investigating an absence of text, he looks at why textual intrusion onto the fabric of sacred architecture is scarce in the Archaic and early Classical Greek world. He also asks why it became more common — and more prominent — in later periods, starting with Zeus' sanctuary at Labraunda in Caria, where six out of seven structures include dedications on their most prominent architectural element, the architrave. Mylonopoulos explains certain choices through a regard for legibility: that the dedication on the Hall of the Athenians at Delphi was written on the stylobate, rather than the architrave, of the structure might be explained by the topography of this site making a lower-level inscription more visible. More generally, however, Mylonopoulos convincingly interprets the evidence as a result of the Greek habit to keep some visible distance between the human and divine sphere in temple structures: while every temple was a dedication, prominently displaying the name of a human dedicator on a temple's architrave would have seriously disturbed an important balance.
- 7 Alongside these investigations of sacred space, other chapters also explore religious evidence. In his discussion of erasures, for example, Rhodes demonstrates how an erasure on a sacred regulation from Oropus perhaps indicates how Amphiaraios' sanctuary adapted its practice with regard to sacrificial skins to current Athenian religious practice, after Athens regained control of Oropus in the 330s BC. Another example is Graham's study of 'duplicate' inscriptions at Aphrodisias, which takes the Sebasteion temple as one of its principal case studies: just one of the many examples from this volume which showcase how much of monumental epigraphy in the ancient world is intricately connected to religious contexts.
- 8 Less directly, but not less significantly, the volume's theoretical considerations of materiality also offer many useful insights for the field of Greek religion. Epigraphic texts make up a crucial part of our evidence base for ancient religious beliefs and

practices: from sacred regulations and ritual norms, to votive dedications and funerary texts. Furthermore, inscribed writing was a constant presence in sacred spaces: not only religious texts but also civic inscriptions were set up and displayed in sanctuaries across the Greek world, influencing the experience of worshippers at these sites. As such, a better understanding of how the materiality of texts impacts these texts' meaning is not only beneficial but also crucial. Many of the essays in this volume demonstrate the ways in which an inscription, understood as a physical object, can itself carry agency as an active participant in public space: this agency can of course be led by the intent of the inscriber, but can also work independently from its original purpose. Elements such as an inscription's design, lay-out and location, as well as alterations in its physical material (such as erasures) could take on and transmit meanings of their own. The material of an inscription, for example, can by itself communicate meaning, signaling the inscription's type even before a passerby might start reading the text (Leatherbury, Zadorojnyi). Another example of agency can be seen in the way in which the particular material of an inscription can in and of itself effect whether or not it is likely to undergo 'memory sanctions' such as *damnatio memoriae*, as Östenberg demonstrates.

- 9 A second important point which many of the book's chapters highlight is the repeated, practical usage of inscribed writing. So Rhodes and Östenberg's demonstrations of the efforts put into adapting and altering inscriptions highlights not only inscriptions' function as records, but also as objects to be *used*, as texts to be read. Rhodes sets out the evidence for the fact that it is the public, inscribed version of documents which was altered, showing the importance of these texts was closely interlinked with their materiality and their physical, visual presence in public space. Even if an inscription might not start out as the authoritative version of a law or decree, it seemingly can *become* so.
- 10 Of course, the obstacles complicating the study of the materiality of ancient texts are significant, and many such complexities inevitably rear their head in this volume. Determining spatial context, for example, is difficult for inscriptions, for many of which the exact original location remains unknown. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the most innovative chapters in the volume deal with inscriptions on architectural elements, which can in certain cases be fixed in space more easily (Day, Mylonopoulos). A few chapters also illustrate the difficulties of attributing meaningfulness to particular choices in the presentation of inscribed texts. Graham, for example, claims that variations between duplicate copies of inscriptions can be 'the result of deliberate choices and planning, rather than accidents and unintended omissions'. Yet in all the examples she discusses, variety appears to be the consequence either of spatial constraints or the errors of stone carvers. Another general difficulty concerns the crucial questions of legibility and visibility: how much do we know about who read these inscribed texts? A few chapters in the volume suggest that visual characteristics, whether lay-out or decorative elements, assisted with legibility: Graham argues that inscribed decorations are not only aesthetic but play a functional role too as highlighter, helping readers identify certain aspects of a text. Leatherbury makes a similar point, claiming that 'visual characteristics were 'operative' for all viewers, whether highly literate, completely illiterate, or (as most Romans were) somewhere in between the two extremes'. While many chapters similarly briefly raise the issue of legibility, it would have been useful to see some more direct and deeper

engagement with questions of literacy and orality, and the study of intended – and realized – audiences.

- 11 In general, however, this volume offers a range of fascinating and useful attempts at tackling the difficult task of studying the materiality of inscribed writing. As many chapters demonstrate, paying attention to the materiality of inscriptions cannot in and of itself provide a full understanding of these complex sources. However, it can provide crucial further insights into our comprehension of these texts from an additional, and often underexplored, perspective. As such, the book offers a very substantial contribution to the growing study of the materiality, visuality, and physicality of ancient inscribed texts.
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NOTES

1. The table of contents is available below, p. 359.
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