Cahiers d'études africaines

236 | 2019
Paroles de papier

Piquette Kathryn E. & Whitehouse Ruth D. — *Writing as Material Practice. Substance, Surface and Medium* ; KAY Sarah. — *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries.*

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Alexandros Tsakos

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/28254
DOI: 10.4000/etudesafricaines.28254
ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher
Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version
Date of publication: 5 December 2019
Number of pages: 1174-1180
ISBN: 9782713227813
ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference
Alexandros Tsakos, « Piquette Kathryn E. & Whitehouse Ruth D. — *Writing as Material Practice. Substance, Surface and Medium* ; KAY Sarah. — *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries.* », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 236 | 2019, Online since 05 December 2019, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/28254 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.28254

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1 Herein two books are going to be briefly discussed. Although they have very little in common and are (geographically) peripheral to the topic of the present volume, they both offer models for analysis of the materiality of African texts that were deemed worthwhile to include. Both works are admirable efforts innovatively tackling the issue of the materiality of written texts and can be applied to African material, as I exemplify with a Christian manuscript from medieval Nubia (see also Tsakos in this volume). This sort of re-use of the theories and methods proposed in these books was explicitly stated as the aim of at least the publication by K. Piquette & R. Whitehouse: "We hope that this

volume provides an invaluable resource for those seeking to develop their own research in this area" (p. 10).

2 The book Piquette and Whitehouse edited is a volume with 17 chapters deriving from a conference on "Writing as Material Practice." The subtitle of the publication reveals the manner in which this practice is being understood: as *substance,* that is, the actual material on or in which a text is written, as well as the tools with which this act is performed; as *surface,* that is, the interplay between this act and the material, both as far as the scribe and as far as the reader are concerned; and as *medium,* that is the "environment" of the acts of writing and reading, taken at large as the social context of the writing practice.

3 In the 15 contributions that address these topics (the first and last chapters are the introduction and epilogue respectively), there are quite some surprises—both positive and negative—awaiting the reader: examples of the latter quality is the over-representation of the ancient world (11 out of 15 contributions), and the lack of a contribution dealing with the manuscript cultures and their specific material practices (with the exception of Chapter 16 dealing with conservation issues in the framework of libraries and archives). This is perhaps linked with the absence of the Middle Ages from the empirical data used by the authors (except for Chapter 2 and 3 dealing with Inca and Maya writing practices respectively, and which flank chronologically what is traditionally considered as the medieval centuries). Conversely, both the understanding of writing and of the surfaces "on" which it is performed have a very wide spectrum: the inclusion of Inca cord-notation (*khipu,* see Chapter 2) or of the iconic literacy and *situla* art in pre-Roman Veneto (see Chapter 13), which stand out as two characteristic examples of this spectrum. As far as the former is concerned, "contributors to this volume address the subject of 'writing' in a broad sense, including written-text and signs taken to represent units of language as well as marking systems that are less clearly related to spoken language" (p. 2); and in regards to the latter, it is a focus on the social dimension of writing that offers an explanation of how such art can be seen as writing, as acts of creation of meaning, because such a creation is seen "as part of a socially-situated *chaîne opératoire*" *(ibid.).*

4 The social dimension of writing dominates the book (see for example Chapters 5-9 dealing with writing in the Bronze Age of the Aegean and the Levant). This should be expected since the editors aim at challenging the division between archaeology and philology, reinstating contexts to contents through focusing on "writing as material practice." Indeed, some chapters achieve this magisterially, albeit working on completely different periods, regions, and material. This has inevitably the result that contributions prioritizing a single discipline do not stand out positively (this is the case with Chapters 4 and 10). Additionally, the preferences of each reader are necessarily biased by the focus of the given reader's (research) interests.

5 In my opinion, Chapters 11 and 14, dealing with Egypt in the Bronze Age and North Italy in the Iron Age, best serve the goals of the volume and, naturally, one would think, since these are those authored by the two editors. Moreover, Chapter 8 stands out among the contributions dealing with the Aegean Bronze Age thanks to its focus on the uses and re-uses of the material carrier of the studied texts, and which at the same time shows similarities with the approach by Piquette in Chapter 11, thus proving that the model proposed by the editor functions paradigmatically. Finally, Chapter 15 opens new paths of understanding writing in archaeological contexts where otherwise it

might have passed unnoticed, while at the same time it brings insights into the topic of "writing as material practice" from more recent periods "saving" the publication from being neglected by those who are not primarily interested in the ancient world.

6 After all, there is one chapter which most attracted my attention because it allowed the application of some ideas and methods proposed therein to my own field of studies, namely Africa in general (also the focus of Chapter 11 by Piquette), and Nubia in particular: this is Chapter 12 by Stephen Kidd, titled "Written Greek but Drawn Egyptian: Script Changes in a Bilingual Dream Papyrus."

7 As the title suggests, Kidd's study analyzes a text (dating from the 3rd century BCE), where a man writes to his friend about a dream that he had. While the address is in Greek, the dream itself is narrated in Demotic, because as the scribe states "I have written below in Egyptian so that you will know precisely" (p. 240). Kidd examines the material practice of writing a text in Greek and Demotic in terms of surface, tools and positioning of the scribe, but cannot find in the way this papyrus was written an explanation for this choice of narrating the dream, because, as he will reveal to his readers, this is rather linked with the difference between alphabetic and logographic scripts, as Greek and Demotic can be characterized respectively. Rather, the explanation given by Kidd can be summarized by the following citation further on in his contribution: "Egyptian script is rooted in a visuality which an alphabetic script cannot attain" (p. 246). Perhaps this visuality of the Demotic script allows for a fluidity in the interpretation of the dream, as dreams are notoriously vague and their interpretations uncertain. However, this psychologizing of the material practice chosen in writing the letter on the papyrus scrutinized in Chapter 12 does not occupy central stage in Kidd's argumentation. He rather focuses on the fact that the images created by the signs of a logographic (and of course pictographic) script are more vivid and closer graphically to the experienced meaning they want to convey (a snake is a snake and a crocodile is a crocodile) than the idea about this meaning conveyed by words in an alphabetic script (the word "snake" does not resemble a snake but refers to it). Building on observations in earlier studies about the effectiveness expected by the mutilation of certain hieroglyphs against "the fear that these hieroglyphic images would come to life and threaten the dead person in his or her eternity," Kidd concludes that "the fear of the word can never be realized in such a way that the words *qua* images become the animals they appear to be" *(ibid.)*. It is this conclusion that can be challenged by the application of these very interesting ideas to details of a Nubian manuscript, namely British Library, Or. 6804.

8 The text is written in Sahidic Coptic (Coptic is the last phase of the Egyptian language first appearing in script with the hieroglyphs), which is an alphabetic script based on the Greek letters with the addition of six signs deriving from Demotic, so as to express sounds not existing in the Greek language.

9 The manuscript contains the work *Book of Bartholomew,* also known as the *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Leaving aside its contents, which can be gathered from several recent publications,[1] it is important to note the effort made by the scribe to decorate his creation with illuminated initials and rubrications. This tendency to decoration takes two very intriguing paths in this manuscript.

10 First, in several instances, the long vertical bars of letters extending below their lines traverse the horizontal bars of letters in the next line, creating the image of a cross, the symbol *par excellence* of Christianity. This practice is observed 25 different times in the

manuscript, which leads me to believe that letter forms do more in this text than just convey the meaning of the word they are part of; they are rather constituent elements of an image, which surpasses the function of an alphabetic script. However, this example by itself does not prove the case. Letters have been used in Christian literacy to form cross-shaped monograms, which function as abbreviations of symbols of faith, names of divine personae etc. There is one more detail in the same manuscript though that shows that in the common literary and spiritual ecumene of Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia (where the production of the manuscript can be securely placed) the tradition of a pictographic or logographic value of writing seems to be retained centuries after the adoption of alphabetic script in Egypt.

11 On the right end side of line 17 of folio 13v of the British Library manuscript (page 36 of the original manuscript), a series of hymns in glory of the resurrected Christ have been presented by the Apostle Bartholomew to the other Apostles. Then, in recapitulation of his vision, Bartholomew explains that "all of them [were] rejoicing because the Son of God had risen from the dead and delivered the sons of Adam from captivity." The word "dead" in Coptic is ⲚⲈⲦⲘⲞⲞⲨⲦ and the diphthong ⲞⲨ is written with a very popular ligature where upsilon is superimposed to omicron. What is, however, noteworthy in this specific instance is that the form of this ligature has been turned by the scribe into a bug, by filling the body of omicron with ink and shaping the diagonals of upsilon as two antennae. Apparently, the impression that the scribe wanted to convey was the result of the appearance of such from within the dead body following death. The putrefaction caused by "worm(s)" is cited elsewhere in the same text. This seems like a perfect example of the inverse of the earlier quotation: "the fear of the word can never be realized in such a way that the words *qua* images become the animals they appear to be"!

12 Indeed, Coptic uses a script that partly derives from the Demotic script, which has been the point of departure for this attempt to see how studies included in the volume edited by Piquette and Whitehouse can inspire similar analyses upon material from regions and eras not touched upon by their publication. The attempt just presented is an explicit recognition that *Writing as Material Practice* will be a source and a tool for related studies in the future.

13 The manuscript British Library, Or. 6804 will provide the *comparandum* also for the ideas set forward by the book by Sarah Kay; but first some words of praise about her work.

14 This is a study "undertaken," according to the author, "in order to explore how a widely read and influential genre may have shaped readers' sense of the relationship between themselves and other animals" (p. 149). Kay proposes that "the bestiaries' impact will have been twofold, operating both through the content of the texts themselves and through their transmission as parchment books," and she further argues that "these two factors are consistently *sutured* one to the other via textual references to skin and because of the fact that the pages themselves are instances of skin" *(ibid.)*. Thus, *sutured* may also be humans and animals, through the surface of the parchment pages, which mirror both the exterior feeling of the skin, shared both by humans and animals, and what is hidden below the skin, to the depths of the soul. The last dimension is reached through metaphors, similitudes and the theologizing of the otherwise natural sciences-specific descriptions of the beasts populating the contents of these medieval books.

15 A superb example of the suture of the categories of content and surface of page can be found in the chapter on the Hydrus and the Crocodile. The Hydrus is a serpent-like beast that "smears itself with mud," from the Nile where it lived, "then creeps into a sleeping Crocodile and devours it from the inside by chomping through its entrails; allegorically this refers to the incarnation of Christ and the harrowing of Hell" (p. 52). In relation to a depiction of this violent symbolic penetration from Philippe de Thaon's bestiary preserved in the Royal Library of Denmark, Copenhagen, Kay explains: "The artist has threaded the Hydrus through the Crocodile with care and deliberation. Although the streams of blood from its exit and entry points indicate the lethal effects on Crocodile of the Hydrus's progress, the overall impression remains—or it seems to me—more decorative than traumatic. What makes the 'hide of the flesh' appear as such on this page is not its representation in the image but the margins of the page itself, the long sewn up tear in the top right hand margin of fo. 21r producing an emphatic parallel to the holes bored by the Hydrus in the Crocodile [...] The teaching that impresses itself on the reader's mind is borne in this manuscript by a skin that can be identified with the 'hide of the flesh' of the Hydrus and the harsh hide of the Crocodile. And because it expresses her own human 'hide of the flesh,' filling it with thoughts that are assumed as hers, the hide of the page appears in some sense as the reader's own skin. She herself and not the Crocodile are to be pierced and internally consumed by the incarnate Christ." (p. 59)

16 In Kay's book—and in this review—there is a consistent focus on the skin made parchment and its participation in the violence, the fragility and mortality shared by the animals depicted and the human reader. Subsequently, there is an intriguing distinction in Kay's thought between what Martha Rust (2007) in her work *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books* has called "codicological consciousness," namely, as Kay describes it, the "awareness on the reader's part of such aspects of book production as *ordination* [the structural arrangement of a book's parts] and the quality of illustration" (p. 142) and Kay's own advocacy for "a codicological unconscious in which reading can be subject to contingent interference from the look and feel of the page itself" *(ibid.).*

17 Consequently, all through her work, Kay proposes that the cuts, holes and mendings on the parchment pages are used and/or made consciously by the scribes in order to awaken in the unconscious of the reader, feelings and sensations related to the nature of the "beasts" described and depicted in each chapter.

18 This is the point where the interest with this book reached for me its climax: The Book of Bartholomew from the British Library preserves the conscious effort of its scribe to awaken codicologically an unconscious relationship between the readers and the page as surface and content. The manuscript presents tears and mendings on two folia, n°s 8 and 10, which were made before the scribe copied the text, since the letters move around these page-scars. Now, in the colophon of this manuscript the scribe proudly states that he himself prepared the parchments, a statement that sounds like a paradox given such a seemingly poor result (due to the cuts and mendings) on a couple of pages; at worst as an indication that the scribe, either a Nubian or working for a Nubian client, was not that professional with the art of making parchment, binding sheets into quires, creating precious codices. But how could that be if the skins needed to make a codex meant that many animals had to be slaughtered and time and effort invested, making the whole venture a very costly one? Especially given the numerous decorations in the page margins, the use of different inks etc. Reading Kay's book, a different scenario

became plausible, namely that the scribe of the BL manuscript made this statement fully aware of its significance: that just like the content of the work was carefully copied and nicely decorated, equally carefully were the pages selected, equally nicely were they made part of a well-calculated codicological product. If this was the case, then the use of the sheets with the tears on folia nos 8 and 10 might also have been calculated and quite intentional. Could it *possibly* be the case that the scribe of the Bartholomew manuscript was operating based on similar codicological consciousness, and was awakening a similar codicological unconscious in his readers as Kay discerned in the relation between scribe and readers of the medieval Latin and French Bestiaries she studied?

19 There are significant observations to be gathered through a more careful look to the contents of the manuscript specifically on these folia where the cuts and mendings have been noticed.

20 The recto of folio 8 contains a hymn to Mary, the mother of Jesus; a blessing that her son addresses right before ascending to the heavens. As the text runs towards the end of the page, we read the promise given by Jesus to his mother that she will be with God after she has left her body: "And your body, I will make the Cherubim with the sword of fire keep watch over it, and twelve hundred angels will also keep watch over it, until the day of my appearance and my kingdom." So, at the place where a cut in the parchment is mended, a promise is given that Mary's body will be guarded, preserved, venerated. Here, according to Kay's analysis, the reader's mind should recognize the corporality of the page. Then, if the scribe, who also made the codex, was indeed aware of where he was placing each parchment sheet, in the case of the mended folio 8, he made an excellent choice: the reparation of the cut in the lower-right corner recalls the vulnerability of human nature and the need for protection by superhuman agents. Moving from the suture of human and animal in the bestiaries, in the Book of Bartholomew we see the hide of the flesh suturing the human and the divine—an act appropriate for the person who united the divine and human natures through the miracles of her Immaculate conception and the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, according to the theology of the scribe.

21 The text on the verso of folio 8 describes Mary bringing the good news of the Resurrection to the Apostles, who praise her. Then, the narrative returns to the image of the ascending Christ. The folio contains the end of the scene with Mary, and the focal point is her holy body, her blessed womb, and the praising she receives as the last act of Jesus before leaving his earthly state. The focus on the body and womb that brought Christ among the humans is accentuated by the skin surface marked as a carrier and marker of humanity. Kay's paradigm seems to work perfectly here.

22 Folio 10 contains the first hymn of the angels in honor of Jesus who forgave Adam through his crucifixion and thus saved him and "all his sons." Interestingly, the framed title of the hymn characterizes the son of God as "our perfection." The text in the rest of the verso exhibits rich red-color decoration of all the letters *pi* for the definite article in the expression ⲡ-ⲉⲟⲟⲩ (the glory), the element which opens each phrase (verse?) in the hymn to Jesus ("glory to you the good shepherd, Amen; Glory to you, the [...]"). In this manner, the contents of the page are invested with sacrality, as has been observed in several occasions for the use of red ink in Nubian manuscripts.[2] At the same time, the folio is marked by a mended cut, shorter than the one of folio 8, but clearly visible and again present before the scribe copied the work. Does this cut remind the readers of the

imperfection of their own nature? And does the scribe underscore his humbleness in front of the glorious miracles he describes in his manuscript? Can it thus be that the scribe consciously placed this scarred page here in order to awaken in the unconscious of his readers the distance between the earthly world of the skins and the world of the heavens where everything finds its perfection?

23 These ideas are nascent and perhaps speculative, but they are rendered probable through comparison with the ways Kay understood the content and form of the Latin and French bestiaries she studied. Kay's work offers plausible insight into the world of codicological consciousness and unconscious, insight that is related to the topic of the work itself, which was proudly presented by the scribe of British Library, Or. 6804 to his Nubian clients, namely the Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle. This saint martyred during his apostolic work in Armenia by being *flayed* and then crucified head downwards.

24 The flaying of Bartholomew inspired one of the first attempts by Sarah Kay to investigate the possibility that "the wounds in the parchment may have been seen as a graphic realization of the text's content, an uncanny precipitate of its ideas in concrete form" (p. 36).[3] Is it just a coincidence that similar ideas have been discerned in the Copto-Nubian literacy in precisely the manuscript that preserved the longest version of one of the works attributed to this specific Apostle?

25 The two books presented in this essay have offered me insights into the world of Christian Nubian literacy, the focus of my research. This was perhaps unexpected given Kay's focus on manuscript cultures of medieval Europe and the examination in the edited volume by Piquette and Whitehouse of carriers other than manuscripts or of literacy of mainly the ancient world. However, there is nothing unexpected in the observation that practices and mentalities can operate in similar manners across cultural borders and chronological limits, especially when what is under scrutiny is based on a social practice exercised on similar *surfaces,* with similar *substances,* through similar *mediums*. What we then observe is the *suture* between distant disciplines of the academic world and the continents of the Earth.

NOTES

1. Most notably, C. H. Bull & A. Tsakos, "The Book of Bartholomew (Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ). A new translation and introduction," in T. Burke (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures,* forthcoming and M. Westerhoff, *Auferstehung und Jenseits im koptischen "Buch der Auferstehung Jesu Christi, unseres Herrn,"* Orientalia Biblica et Christiana 11, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1999.

2. Most recently, see V. W. J. van Gerven Oei & A. Tsakos, "Rubrication Patterns in Two Old Nubian Manuscripts from Serra East," *Études et Travaux,* forthcoming.

3. This is discussed by the same author in other work such as: S. KAY, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* 36 (1), 2006, pp. 35-73.