Approaching monumentality in pre-modern epigraphic and manuscript traditions

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Visitors to the Andalusian Mosque of Cordoba may experience a transcendental feeling when looking at Qur'anic texts woven into the architectural surfaces. Simultaneously, they can appreciate the very human reality behind producing such a work: the creative ingenuity and craftmanship, the physical and intellectual exertion, the sheer breadth of commitment and the amount of time invested in the making of these inscriptions. Similar examples of inscribed texts that have absorbed an impressive amount of creative energies can be found in many parts of the pre-modern world. Those who pass by the ancient Mesopotamian carvings located high on mountain cliffs have been captivated by their monumental aura for thousands of years; nevertheless, it has been a subject of debate what specifically makes them monumental (Ben-Dov and Rojas 2021). Further removed from the customary association with monuments as massive stone structures are small artifacts whose monumentality may derive from their significance for communities (Wu Hung 1995), and even moving images in film installations that have been discussed as monumental in their capacity to commemorate events and preserve memories (Vogt 2015: 123–4). Artists have questioned the boundaries of the 'monumental' by exploring media that differ from the static nature of stone, confronting the notion of permanence typically tied to monuments. In a modern version of the 'tower of Babel' displayed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, artist Gu Wenda challenges both the nature of writing and that of the monument by creating an enormous structure and

materializing script using only human hair and glue (Fig. 1).

The label 'monumental' is thus fluid in both tangible and intangible ways, having become liberated from its conventional physical and conceptual boundaries. In inter-disciplinary dialogue there is a marked proclivity towards defining monuments—and monumentality—not on the basis of size and grandeur, but rather on the social reality surrounding them. People's relation to structures shifts over time (Cooley 2000; Ben-Dov and Rojas 2021): only through understanding the sensory, emotional, and cognitive human experiences involved can we gain a holistic appreciation of monumentality (DeMarrais et al. 2004; Boivin 2008; Malafouris 2013). Recent studies that explore these issues include *Approaching monumentality in archaeology* (Osborne 2014) and *Size matters: understanding monumentality across ancient civilizations* (Buccellati et al. 2019), both of which explore how perceptions of monumentality are revealed in social realities. These discussions have, however, focused primarily on carved or constructed monuments, paying little attention to inscriptions as embodiments of monumentality. Writing is often not just a feature of the monument: it can be its focal point (e.g. Ragazzoli et al. 2018; Zilmer 2016). As Jeremy Smoak and Alice Mandell argue (2019: 312) in their study of the Siloam Tunnel Inscription from Iron Age Jerusalem:

> ... an object's monumentality proceeds from its site of display in a larger

> setting, its interactions with people, and the way in which it affects time in the sense that it stimulates memories that people carry away with them.

Exploring the monumentality of writing in its many forms is therefore integral to gaining a more nuanced understanding of the social practices related to the act of inscribing and engaging with inscriptions.

In this volume, the notion of monumentality is explored in such a way as to stimulate wider consideration of an inscription's material, visual, and interactive properties. The contributors focus on the 'notion of writing as object, and an object that is embedded within the full spectrum of human sensory experience' (Piquette and Whitehouse 2013: 6). Taken as 'text artifacts' (Silverstein 2020), inscriptions are approached from the perspective of material culture to shed light on the techniques used to produce them, the underlying strategies of communication, as well as the intention (purpose) and intension (meaning) associated with script and writing. The authors juxtapose aspects of manuscript and text production from widely differing cultural and religious backgrounds, prompted by the following questions: How does a community monumentalize an inscription and what is the instrumental value of the notion of 'monumentality' in the study of ancient texts and inscriptions? What do the material transformations of writing in the course of the production of a monumental inscription tell us about differences in the use, understanding, and appreciation of manuscript and epigraphic texts in the cultures under study? How can we enhance our understanding of the ways in which pre-modern cultures interacted with various material supports and artistic techniques, dealt with practical limitations, abided by the rules of decorum and beliefs associated with the potency of writing?

This volume explores the transformations of text between manuscripts and epigraphy in a range of cultures, covering sources from ancient Mesopotamia to medieval England, and from Bronze Age China to pre-colonial Maya. Several papers investigate the multi-staged process of creating an inscription: from its inception, often in the oral sphere, to its materialization in durable media that were placed in either visible or hidden contexts. They analyse the way textual content is incorporated in a new setting, including both the conventional monumental settings, such as tombs, temples, and palaces, as well as mobile artifacts of special types (notably in the contribution of Škrabal). Interactions between manuscript and epigraphic practices are given particular consideration, including the continuing influence of epigraphic forms in subsequent manuscript contexts (particularly in Birkett's contribution).

Monumentality: visual rhetoric and interactive properties

When words are carved, they gain a new set of properties and assume the potential to create liminal spaces, where discourses between the realm of the material and spiritual, between the living and the dead, and between past and future can connect. Monuments can be sites of communication, where writing becomes a device, a new technology that enables things to happen beyond a finite time-frame. Seth Sanders (2019: 345) describes this use of writing in the Near Eastern Bronze Age as a semiotic shift through which the potency of writing acquired new dimensions in the establishment of the mortuary cult, with the result that 'words, when inscribed into things, made them monuments in a new way'.

The study of monumentality involves addressing the visual arrangement of a text as well as philological and linguistic aspects that hint at an inscription's function and interactive properties. Consideration of the visual rhetoric, including the role of different semiotic features, helps us understand how an inscription could engage the viewer actively beyond its syntactic and semantic content, paving the way for greater appreciation of the dynamism and agency of monumental works (Smoak and Mandell 2018; Graham 2021; Stauder-Porchet 2021). A focus on the visual rhetoric of inscriptional texts reveals dynamic aspects of monumentality that require consideration of the fullest range of evidence, including materiality, architectural form, landscape, and artistic and textual practices. It further highlights the value of a contextualized approach through which the understanding of an inscription gains dimensionality in a range of perspectives, namely how it interacts with its direct and indirect surroundings, with a present and future audience, and with other monuments (see Graham 2013).

Monumental texts exist in a complex relationship with the oral sphere, but they are usually removed and separated from it by several layers of intermediate written compositions. This defines the range of questions discussed in this volume. Several papers focus on inscriptions that are related to an oral context, such as a royal speech (Škrabal) or ritual performances (Alvarez), while others are linked to legal agreements originally concluded in an oral form (Kahl), or discourses developed with consideration of the monumental context (Hogue). The detachment of speech and its fixation into a material text is known as 'entextualization'; it often involves conscious and unconscious adaptations (Urban 1996: 21) that must be identified and evaluated in order to interpret the texts effectively. In ancient Greece, 'just as the human voice was thought to consist of letters (*charaktēres*, literally "things engraved," or *tupoi*, literally physical "impressions"), so, conversely, inscriptions had a phonetic and phonographic quality' (Thomas 2014: 66).

Although some inscriptions are derived from oral settings and can be considered as 'artifactualized language' (Silverstein 2020: 15), others have a stronger connection with written forms and formats or display specific adaptation for a monumental setting. To appreciate the interactional properties of an inscription better, according to Michael Silverstein (2020: 27), one should pay greater attention to 'deixis, poetics, and enregistered indexicality of denotational text'. The texts inscribed on permanent surfaces may retain qualities inherited from speech and texts on perishable supports, but they also acquire new features essentially linked to this mode of materiality.

In his study of the Iron Age Aramaic palatial inscriptions from Zincirli (modern southern Turkey), **Timothy Hogue** argues for the importance of considering epigraphic and manuscript practices within their socio-political contexts in order to understand better the intricate social functions of monuments and their inscriptions. He emphasizes how various mechanisms involved in the monumental discourse and its spatial arrangement enable a viewer to engage with the texts inscribed on monuments, not only on a literate level, but also on a semiological one. Through a combination of visual and textual cues, such as the image of the king pointing to his name in the text or in a specific direction, the viewer is guided to certain signs within the texts that would enable them to understand and engage with the inscription without necessarily reading any part of it. Hogue further argues that the monumental textual format was designed to create visual familiarity by combining textual and pictorial elements influenced by Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions and deriving from a variety of more commonly experienced media—including stamp seals, epistolary and contractual texts on clay tablets, and other familiar objects and scenes—that helped the viewer to navigate monumental inscriptions.

Such aspects of literacy and of the semiotics of inscriptions, where signs convey meaning beyond the understanding of the words, are also explored by **Caitlin Davis**. She compares Central Mexican manuscripts with the painted decoration of the Late Postclassic Maya temple of Tulum (13–14th century AD) on the Yucatan peninsula. Although the decoration on the temple walls may resemble pages of a codex, features of the composition hint at important differences between the functions of writing and iconography in manuscripts and in epigraphic contexts. She suggests that the compositions on the walls assimilated influences from various manuscript traditions and local artistic customs, adapting them for a non-literate, multilingual, and international audience.

Jochem Kahl's investigation of a set of ten contractual documents, which were integrated in the accessible part of the tomb of an Ancient Egyptian high official of the early second millennium BC, reveals the complex transformations undergone by the text due to its recontextualization in a different setting. While the papyrus versions of such contracts were normally composed in a standard format, including a list of witnesses, here

the original manuscript format is transformed into the presentation of the biographical genre that was prevalent in tomb chapels of the period and associated with posthumous religious services. Kahl argues that the inscription no longer reads as a legal contract but rather as a commemorative text that would have become the focus of religious ceremonies, ultimately contributing to the deification of this high official.

Although most inscriptions are intended to be viewed and engaged with by various communities in the present and the future, some inscriptions remain hidden. In such cases, visibility and accessibility are not relevant features. The notion of visibility itself 'does not qualify an inscription as monumental' (Vanderhooft 2014: 110), since the primary setting of some inscriptions does not allow nor seek to make the text seen. According to Timothy Pauketat (2014: 442), perceptions of monumentality—in his case uninscribed monuments—can derive from direct engagement, whether experiential or sensory, or indirectly through engaging memory or interacting with the imaginary.

Some forms of inscription also acquire an agency that is independent from a reader, so that the writing takes on performative qualities. **Christelle Alvarez** examines the reconfiguration of ritual texts carved in the hidden underground areas of ancient Egyptian pyramids in the late third millennium BC and unravels the writing practices that developed in these underground and liminal contexts. She argues that certain writings acquire agency, the channeling of which does not depend on the inscription's being seen or read. The materialization of the ritual utterances in carved inscriptions imbued them with performative qualities and transformed them into active elements in their surroundings that did not necessitate direct human interaction with them.

The incorporation of ritual textual and pictorial material in the Maya (Davis) and ancient Egyptian architectural contexts (Alvarez, Kahl) or on the inside of the Chinese bronze vessels (Škrabal) involved significant shifts in function compared with their source material that was used in other written and oral contexts. Visually, the writings were laid out on surfaces rather than stored away on rolled or folded writing-supports. In this way, their presence became permanently manifest, rather than tucked into a medium that could be ignored, discarded, or ruined by wear and tear. This recontextualization of the written word imparted significance to it in new surroundings with different and specialized interactive properties. From inscriptions displayed plainly on a rock surface to writing that is not visible and brings forth the role of the imaginary, or to etched words that have performative functions, the plurality of meaning, function, and use of text calls for holistic approaches to investigating the monumentality of writing.

Monumentalization: graphic design and materiality

While texts and visual forms can be eternalized through etching them into permanent artifacts, they inevitably bear traces of antecedent non-monumental practices. An artisan's chisel may leave a wedge on the rock's surface, making it possible to reconstruct the technology used in the monument's production. Likewise, an omission or a copyist's error can provide insights into ancient manuscript practices that are particularly precious for periods from which no sources written on perishable materials remain. From this vantage point, it can be fruitful to pay close attention to the processes of producing a monumental inscription. The finished product may appear perfect, yet this appearance masks a production process full of compromises and human fallibility. Such attention can bring to life long-forgotten manuscript practices, the understanding of which can be further clarified by consulting evidence from other cultures.

Cross-cultural analysis reveals comparable approaches to monumentalization across the globe. Without necessarily communicating with one another, different cultures adopted similar practices, and etching into stone to immortalize words appears to be a common inclination in literate societies. Broadly understood, the monumentalization of text encompasses processes in which words originally written on fragile, destruction-prone organic surfaces—such as papyrus in ancient Egypt or bamboo slips in China—were transferred onto durable surfaces to be preserved perpetually. This transfer involved a variety of decisions related, in particular, to the adjustment of the text to a new format, different inscribing techniques, and target audiences. The resulting text, its meaning and function therefore encapsulate the scribal practices and the features of the media employed in each successive stage of its production.

Monumentalizing an inscription involves a multi-stage production process (*chaîne opératoire*) incorporating a range of materials, technologies, and social actors. Nonetheless, this process is often given little attention and is not well understood, in part because of the dearth of surviving blueprints and other materials employed in the construction of monuments, such as drafts or artisans' guidelines. In addition, the scarcity of contemporaneous manuscripts also makes it difficult to relate the inscription to the scribal practices of its time. Given these limitations, it becomes essential to pay close attention to minute details. For example, a profound insight into the ways a text was understood and operated with can be gained from an examination of a faintly visible corner of an inscription that preserves an artist's original outline. Informed by fragmentary knowledge of scribal practices of a culture, scholars can reveal the layers of monumentalization of the text on a surface and shed light on writing practices and cognitive processes that

may have been overlooked.

Valuable insights are gained from considering the material properties and roles of temporary media, often organic, used in the process of transferring a text from one setting to another. Examples are bamboo slips and clay moulds employed at the different stages of bronze casting in China, as well as potsherds and papyri used in the intermediary stages of production of lapidary monuments in Egypt. In addition to these more widespread and relatively durable media, monumental texts could be reproduced from more ephemeral writing-supports, such as the wax surfaces on wooden boards employed in the carving of Mesopotamian stone *kudurrus*.[1] These wax-covered wooden tablets, whose role in Mesopotamian written culture is often overlooked, could be reheated and smoothed many times, reminding us that monumental texts are sometimes derived from transient and changeable sources. Moving from one medium to another alters the form and format of texts, and through these adaptations, many of which were conducted in multiple stages, mistakes and misunderstandings could seep into each iteration.

The inscriptions on Early Chinese bronze vessels from the Western Zhou period (early first millennium BC) demonstrate the complex structural and material transformations of the text on its way towards monumentalization. These inscriptions preserve the traces of a manuscript culture that is otherwise not attested archaeologically. **Ondřej Škrabal** traces the process of the production of inscriptions involving royal speeches. Composed in writing initially, these speeches were presented orally in a ceremonial setting and preserved on bamboo slips in royal archives; then they were combined, adapted, rephrased, and rearranged specifically for the bronze medium. Beyond the transformations that the text underwent as it moved from one medium to another, the graphic design of the writing was also manipulated in complex ways. The material nature of the text was transformed comprehensively in several iterations: from brush-inscribed characters on lightweight bamboo slips to mirror-reversed protrusions on clay moulds and finally to the permanent monumental embodiment in precious bronze artifacts.

The example of reconfiguration of the texts in the underground areas of the pyramid discussed by Alvarez further shows a striking level of engagement and consideration in developing and renewing alternative forms of writing and modes of inscription. As the text moved from papyrus to stone inscription, some hieroglyphic signs representing

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[1]   We are thankful to Lynn-Salammbô Zimmermann, who shared her research on the process of monumentalizing Middle Babylonian legal texts from the middle of the second millennium BC at the conference 'Transposition and monumentality of writing' conducted at The Ioannou Centre and The Queen's College in Oxford on 25–26 July, 2019. These legal grant documents were preserved in archives but also carved on stelae, called *kudurrus*, set up in local temples. In her reconstruction of the production process of these inscriptions, Zimmermann argues that some of them were reproduced from wax-covered wooden writing boards, a poorly understood medium that served special purposes in Mesopotamian literary culture, but is not attested in physically preserved examples.

animal or human forms were commonly truncated in the context of burials. Altering the hieroglyph of a lion, for instance, would preserve the sign's phonetic function—which corresponds to the consonant-pair *rw*—while avoiding any repercussions associated with the animal itself. In the Ancient Egyptian context the pictorial writing system involved complex considerations, as it was believed that inscribing images inherently imparted life and agency (Houston and Stauder 2020: 35). It was therefore not only the words and their meaning that were neutralized but also the iconicity of individual signs within the notation of a word.

Influences between epigraphic and manuscript traditions

Forms of writing in the monumental context are intertwined in many ways with those of manuscript traditions. The transfer of specific techniques of stone-carving to the manuscript context or of cursive handwriting onto monumental surfaces permeates both epigraphic and manuscript traditions. While monumental texts are commonly derived from manuscripts, the influence could also be projected in the opposite way, as seen, for example, in the use of the capital square letter-form—*capitalis monumentalis*—on the facade of monuments in the Roman Empire (Poulin 2012: 23). Extracting this style of writing from its context of display and recreating it in 'nondurable surfaces such as cloth, papier-mâché, cardboard, or wood' had the effect of projecting a sort of monumentality onto impermanent surfaces (Petrucci 1993: 54). Strikingly, features of this epigraphic style remain ubiquitous in today's digital media through serif fonts, which 'originated with the carving of inscriptions into stone by Roman masons who added small hooks to the tips of letters to prevent their chisel from slipping' (Poulin 2012: 81). And yet there are other ways in which monumental inscriptions have influenced manuscripts. In the runic manuscript tradition of early medieval England, words were incised into vellum pages very much like text etched into stone. **Tom Birkett** argues that the aim of this process was to reproduce the act of carving and project the properties of epigraphic artifacts onto the pages. According to Birkett, 'runic script—with its lingering association with monumental epigraphy, with incision into stone, and with engravings on weapons—was the natural script to use to illustrate the material quality of writing'. In this way, modes of inscription are in and of themselves the carriers of monumental aura.

Although epigraphic and manuscript practices developed alongside each other, the influence each exerts on the other never stops. Exploring the changes and features of both types of writing and the way they were transferred onto new settings enhances our

awareness of the role of materiality, technologies, and cognitive aspects in pre-modern engagements with text and scripts. This increased awareness of the role of the various media and their materiality complements philological approaches, providing more context for the study of inscriptions. Examination of two essential aspects of monumental inscriptions—the process of production (monumentalization) and its social effect (monumentality)—helps us to ground epigraphy in a web of complex relationships including earlier monuments and perishable manuscripts, designers and artisans who participated in its creation, urban and natural landscapes, as well as contemporary and future audiences that it sought to reach.

Acknowledgements

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