



SCRIBAL PRACTICE

BENTEIN (K.), AMORY (Y.) (edd.) *Novel Perspectives on Communication Practices in Antiquity. Towards a Historical Social-Semiotic Approach.* (Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava 41.) Pp. x + 198, figs, ills. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023. Cased, €138. ISBN: 978-90-04-52651-8.

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This work, which stems from a conference held in Ghent in October 2019, is in line with the growing interest in scribal practice. It is focused on semiotics and materiality of written sources. The introduction outlines the core idea pursued by the editors, which is to apply the historical social-semiotic approach to communication practices. They highlight two fundamental turns: the material one and the spatial one. The former concerns the writing materials and the writing practices, the latter the archaeological context and the context of use. The editors foreshadow a possible third turn, the linguistic one. Ten ‘challenges’ for researchers emerge from their overview, among which are the material and visual aspects, the evolution and the frequency of phenomena. They require interdisciplinary approaches. The introduction is followed by twelve chapters grouped into three parts. The volume ends with indexes of passages and subjects.

The first part consists of six chapters related to the visual and material features of documents. J.-L. Fourmet investigates the relevance of palaeography in documentary texts (the ‘paléographie signifiante’), with particular attention to the phenomenon called *transversa charta*. In this regard, a significant role is played by textual typology: papyri written *transversa charta* mainly preserve letters and legal deeds, whereas other textual typologies related to authorities (petitions, fiscal requests, reports of proceedings and governor’s ordinances) generally adopted the perfibril format. This layout device is the result of economical reasons, in that it avoided wasting papyrus, and of textual reasons, in that the prescript and the final salutation formula were no more present in late antique letters. The perfibril format was maintained for those documents that were intended to imitate more formal documents. The choice of the format was due to a combination of factors such as practice, nature and function of the text, mastering of scribal conventions, broader cultural trends and perception of the ‘right’ format (p. 27). M. Stroppa chooses representative case studies ranging from Ptolemaic to Byzantine times, in order to show that the size of the papyrus or of the script depends on the function foreseen for the text. Particularly large letters may point to exposed writing, a category of written sources that in the papyrological evidence is indicated by the specific terms *euanagnosta*, *eudela*, *eusema*, *phanera* and *saphe*. The smaller size of invitations to parties, which constitute a homogeneous corpus (table 2.2, pp. 34–5), is due to their private use. The resulting picture is that a larger format expresses power and is typical of the official sphere, while a smaller one points to a private field. S. Torallas Tovar deals with the functions of ostraca in antiquity and reassesses them as a writing support. Their use was not limited, as shown by the numerous finds from archaeological excavations conducted with modern techniques. The case studies cover tax receipts, lists and letters, which are analysed in relation to their material and layout. These aspects can sometimes suggest the scribe’s posture during the act of writing and the way in which the writing support was handled. The relevance of palaeography as a ‘deference device’ in late antique Greek letters on papyrus emerges from Amory’s study, where a ‘visual politeness theory’ is proposed (p. 55). The study focuses on the visual devices used in the prescript, in the body and

in the address on the *verso* of the letters. E.A. Conti discusses layout peculiarities of Greek and Latin letters on papyrus related to the upper levels of the administration, which turn out to be conservative and characterising features (table 5.1, p. 67). The first part of the book ends with A. Ghignoli's study concerning late antique lists and inventories written in Greek or Latin from Egypt and Italy. It investigates in particular the layout of the lists and the textual typologies in which they occur.

The four chapters of Part 2 are based on a multimodal approach. Bentein's paper is partly conceptual, as it deals with multimodality, systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics, with a focus on 'discourse planning'. Within this framework, three correlated levels are identified (table 7.1, p. 93): the micro-level, the meso-level and the macro-level, which encompass both linguistic and palaeographical aspects of a text. These aspects are applied to the case study of textualisation of women's letters. Attention is paid to connectors and epistolary formulae on the linguistic side as well as to the use of blank spaces, lectional signs and alignment on the 'visual side'. N. Reggiani studies medical prescriptions preserved in the papyrological evidence from Egypt. They are written not only for physicians but also for pharmacists and laymen: therefore, they were used by people with different skills. Paratextual devices for dividing prescriptions are noteworthy: scribes can use *paragraphoi* and line extensions, write a larger first letter in the first line of the prescription, resort to *ektheseis* and *vacats*, to certain monograms or to the specific words *allo* and *pros*. As far as the textual indicators of a new recipe are concerned, the most obvious is the title. Syriac inscriptions dated to late antiquity are dealt with by J. Wolfe, who sets them within their cultural and religious background. An important role in transmitting the message is played by palaeographical devices, such as the direction of the script, the letter forms and the way in which they were carved. The visual relevance of the script clearly emerges in Christian acronyms. S. Béthume focuses on archaic Greek inscriptions from the Western Argolid as exposed writings, with a focus on 'hypercorrect' aspiration, which is indicated by a specific sign at the beginning of the word. Its use is linked to the linguistic variety of ancient Greek and to social background. The last part of the paper is occupied by a theoretical discussion of three concepts related to written utterances: the 'grapheme', the 'grammeme' and the 'scripteme' (pp. 156–9). The second one identifies variations within an alphabet, while the third one has an indexical nature.

The two chapters of Part 3 apply a quantitative approach. Hypercorrection is the main topic in G. De Mol's paper, which focuses on the numeral *okto* ('eight'). It is interpreted as an essentially social phenomenon that mostly occurs in formal texts addressed by superordinates to subordinates. Its use is also affected by personal choice. M. Depauw investigates the reasons for the division of words in Greek documentary papyri. As far as letters are concerned, textual typology seems to play a more relevant role than chronology: in a comparison of Ptolemaic and Roman times, the rate of split words in official letters is 2.15% and 2.23%, whereas in private letters the difference is greater, corresponding to 1.63% and 3.40% respectively. The length of the split words also played a role (pp. 186–8).

The book mainly concerns Greek texts, but various Latin and some Syriac texts are also taken into consideration, thus providing a notable variety of case studies. As for the material, the evidence mostly consists of papyri, at times of potsherds and inscriptions. The research perspectives proposed in the introduction are fruitfully resorted to in the following chapters, which prove to be a successful mix of skills traditional for Classicists and new approaches deriving from multimodality. As is shown, layout, size, function, visual aspects, semiotics, scribal practice and the physical characteristics of the writing support should not be considered as something different from the text. On the contrary, they are connected and play a key role in transmitting the message. The volume

demonstrates the importance of interdisciplinary studies in deepening the knowledge of both papyrological and epigraphical sources, and proves to be an insightful model for similar studies. It has been carefully edited; when necessary, explanatory images, tables, graphs and drawings are provided, in order to help understand the case studies.

Universität Heidelberg

ANDREA BERNINI
andrea.bernini@zaw.uni-heidelberg.de