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Introduction

When Marshall McLuhan wrote *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962, he argued that the invention of print—and with it mass communication—changed not only society, but human consciousness itself. McLuhan’s predictions were eerily prescient: with text-generating devices never far from our fingers, and advertising campaigns conquering even the sanctuary of our lavatory cubicles, we contend daily with what it means to live in a text-saturated world. But what of the time before print, the Middle Ages, when most of society could neither read nor write? What kind of work does writing do in a non-typographical society, a society without the mechanical means to mass-produce texts? For the medievalist this question involves looking not only at manuscript culture but also at other kinds of text-bearing artefacts in the Middle Ages to understand the role of writing in medieval society. For a literature scholar in particular, this means asking, what can stories of magical inscribed rings or prophetic writing on walls tell us about how writing was perceived before print transformed this world?

Archaeological studies have brought to light a great number of medieval artefacts that bear writing. In addition to codices and single sheets of parchment or paper, objects like swords, rings, tombstones, crosses, and clothing were also used to transmit texts both poetic and mundane. These inscriptions might range in length from single words (a craftman’s name on a candleholder, for example) to longer compositions in verse, as on the monumental Ruthwell Cross. We may find these text-bearing artefacts preserved in museums and can also encounter them in the literature of the Middle Ages. An inscribed sword-hilt in *Beowulf* tells the story of how a race of giants perished from the earth. In some version of the Arthurian legend, the Grail displays the written word of God, and the ominous warning on the gate to Hell in Dante’s *Divina Commedia* continues to fascinate readers.

Rather than adding to the excellent work that has been done on actual text-bearing artefacts from the Middle Ages, this book focuses on “narrated inscriptions”, that is, inscriptions imagined in medieval European literatures. By “inscription” we mean all writing whose material differs from the medieval standard of ink and parchment or paper. A prototypical inscription, such as a stone epitaph, is incised, its letters formed by scraping off the material surface of an artefact. But this volume also considers additive inscriptions, in which a text is affixed to a surface, as in the case of a leather belt beset with gems spelling a word.

Narrated inscriptions as opposed to physical ones allow us to explore different perspectives on the powers of the written word in the Middle Ages. By looking at literary accounts, we may uncover not only medieval *practices* of textuality, but also medieval conceptualisations of extraordinary forms of writing. Since fictional events are not necessarily committed to the laws of physics, narrated inscriptions may provide us with fresh insights into the imaginative and sometimes fantastical potential and

boundaries of writing itself. The marked presence of material writing in a literary text also challenges us to examine the issues of metatextuality. As several of the chapters in this volume argue, fictional inscriptions interrupt the process of narration and reveal what it means to be a reader of both texts and things.

This duality of a world marked by linguistic abstractions and tangible objects actually lay at the heart of the emerging discipline of medieval studies in the nineteenth century. One of the first Germanists, Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), understood philology as an encompassing endeavour that attends to both words and things. While some philologists preferred to explore medieval texts in order to chart linguistic developments, others chose to analyse the literary remains of the Middle Ages in order to reconstruct the culture and imagination of the past. Such reconstructions also included studies of medieval materiality, as evidenced by the work of another pioneer in medieval German studies, Friedrich Panzer (1870–1956). His fascination with the Middle Ages oscillated between a philologist’s love of the written word and an archaeologist’s desire to be among the material remnants of a bygone age, culminating in a monumental project to collect all existing medieval inscriptions in the German language. As objects of study that perfectly amalgamate textuality and thingness, inscriptions, Panzer argued, provide a unique window into medieval literary and material culture.¹

While Panzer very much wished for inscriptions narrated by literary texts to be included in the collection he initiated, the task fell to later scholars. Nikolaus Henkel was the first to present a compilation entirely dedicated to narrated inscriptions, focusing mainly on texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He concluded that epitaphs and other engravings found only in imaginative texts may reveal something about medieval attitudes to the written word, but are indebted to literary traditions rather than based on actual material practices.² Ulrich Ernst added a number of French examples to Henkel’s German catalogue and analysed narrated inscriptions in conjunction with other forms of writing in medieval literature, most notably letters.³

Both Henkel and Ernst were concerned with the textual side of inscriptions. Investigating the inscription’s place in a book culture that constantly developed genres and literary formulas, both studies address a number of issues that are also fundamentally important for this volume. First, narrated inscriptions may be explored with an eye to their content and linguistic appearance: what are they about? How long are the engraved texts? What languages are they written in? Are the text-bearing artefacts and their inscriptions cited ekphrastically or only mentioned in passing? Which conventions of genre and rhetoric determine their setting? Which communicative

¹ Panzer 1966. The project Panzer initiated is still ongoing, now under the aegis of various Academies of Sciences and Humanities in Germany: “Die Deutschen Inschriften des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit”, <http://www.inschriften.net/projekt.html> (last accessed: 06.06.2018). Cf. also Ott 2014 on Panzer’s ideas of an epigraphic philology.

² Henkel 1992.

³ Ernst 2006.

functions (appellative, declarative, prophetic, etc.) do they serve? Second, narrated inscriptions provoke us to consider their metatextual relationships to the texts that narrate them: how are text-bearing artefacts embedded in the flow of a narrative plot? How and why do individual texts employ inscriptions to highlight questions of literary reception and performance?

This volume desires to do more than merely supplement Henkel and Ernst's Germanist collections with a European perspective. We also aim to expand the focus of the inquiry to include not only the textual, but also the physical side of narrated inscriptions. Rather than reading epitaphs, tattoos and engraved rings only as texts-within-a-text, we explore them as material artefacts as well and reveal what happens when writing, so reliant on abstract signifiers, is reified. Such an endeavour sits well with current approaches in material cultures studies. Scholars like the sociologist Bruno Latour, the archaeologist Ian Hodder and the political philosopher Jane Bennett, to name but a few, have convincingly shown that not only social relations between humans, but also between material things and materiality, form a crucial part of cultural dynamics. In order to explore this tenet, we propose to reconstruct a medieval "discourse of inscriptionality" that brings together conceptions of text and writing, physical matter, space, and the interplay between humans and things. The chapters of this volume approach these questions by focusing on three points in particular:

Materials and Materiality

Exploring the material side of writing challenges us to rethink the boundary dividing humans and things. Since Antiquity, our inquiries into the natural world have divided matter into two opposing types, organic and inorganic. This dichotomy was sustained by what came to be known as "vitalism", the belief that organic matter differs from inorganic matter because it is saturated with a life force of some kind. While vitalism has fallen into disrepute, modern chemistry still retains the distinction between organic matter, typically carbon-based and associated with living organisms, and inorganic matter, that is, everything else. A number of experiments have exposed the inconsistencies of this classification: organic matter may in fact be created from inorganic substances, and not all material generally classed as organic is part of the life cycle of animate beings.⁴ However, this dualism of matter, while erroneous, has helped to sustain the notion that agency is exclusive to animate beings. Entities composed of organic matter, most notably animals and humans, harness inorganic matter in the form of minerals, stones and computer chips. Inorganic matter, in turn, merely exists to be used, but does not possess any agency of its own.

⁴ Cf. Bennett 2010, 62–81 on the history of twentieth-century vitalism and its discontents.

What if, instead of entrenching an ontological difference between animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic matter, we simply investigated the “materiality” of this world? For Lynn Meskell, this means engaging in “the exploration of the situated experiences of material life, the constitution of the object world and concomitantly its shaping of human experience”.⁵ Jane Bennett goes one step further and proposes to decentralise human experience by not looking *at* material things, but by reading ourselves *as* physical entities sharing materialities with other entities and forces. Drawing on Spinoza among others, she posits “a power present in *every* body”, a “thing-power or vibrant matter” which demands that we attune our perception to nonhuman agencies as well. A power outage, for example, cannot merely be traced back to human error, but must be understood as a disruption in a network that links nuclear waste, cooling water, conductive metal, electrons, utility poles and consumers.⁶

For literary scholars, attending to this idea of vibrant matter means investigating text passages that narrate the material encounters between humans and things. With this volume, we aim to explore the meanings medieval cultures assigned to specific materials marked by human writing, and what meanings inscriptions’ materiality assigned to human writing. What does writing on gold signify, as opposed to writing on fish bones? Does weaving words in textiles differ from writing in blood? How do the human actors in the narratives perceive the materiality of the inscriptions that surround them?⁷ And do the texts tell of a specific “thing-power” inherent in material writing? Considering inscriptions as material entities also allows us to critically evaluate the distinctions we assume between humans and things. Generally, the faculty of speech is considered an exclusively human characteristic. But text-bearing artefacts, inscribed as they are with speech, are anthropomorphised in ways that potentially subvert their thingness. By materialising the human faculty of speech, inscriptions invite us to explore what exactly, if anything, separates human-power from thing-power.

Topology and Mobility

Both humans and things are material forms that exist in spatial relationships that both construct and define them. Their materialities exist in topological relation to other materialities. As we can only perceive space via the distances between material bodies, topology can be understood as a network extending between the human entities, thingly entities and their physical surroundings. Such ties in space bind material

⁵ Meskell 2013, 338.

⁶ Bennett 2010, 2, 13; emphasis in original. Cf. also her analysis of the North American power blackout of 2003 as an example for the collective failure of an assemblage, 24–28.

⁷ Focken et al. 2015, 129–134, esp. 132f. call this “profiles of materiality”.

bodies together and form what Deleuze and Guattari have called “assemblages”. While they use the term to refer to various juxtapositions of heterogeneous components as abstract as linguistic signs and semiotic meanings, Bennett re-interprets assemblages to mean the “ad hoc groupings”⁸ of multiple material elements such as humans and things.⁹ As we see in Michael R. Ott’s chapter on weapons, the medieval concept of the knight does not refer to a single human figure, but to a material assemblage combining a man, a horse, and war-gear.

In such assemblages, the agency is not located with any one entity, but distributed among all elements that are topologically associated with one another. In the case of a relic enclosed in a reliquary that is touched and kissed by believers, for example, holiness is diffused among various material things and the absent saint, while human actors strive to partake in this sacred agency. Our topological inquiries in this volume examine how text-bearing artefacts create or become part of material assemblages. We wish to explore convergences of humans, things and writing and the agency distributed within these epigraphic assemblages. If, as Seeta Chaganti has argued, inscriptions stand out as distinct figures against the receding ground they are engraved in, how does the exact spatial positioning of text impact its perception and function?¹⁰ How does being arrested by an epitaph at one’s feet differ, for instance, from the inscription that defines the threshold one crosses when passing through a gate?

Another aspect of topology has to do with movement through space. Are these assemblages fixed to one place or are the inscriptions mobile, joining new assemblages as they travel? Text-bearing artefacts can be either locostatic or locomobile.¹¹ The position of locostatic inscriptions such as writing on tombstones, stelae, milestones and parts of buildings is permanent, allowing assemblages to develop around them. Their distributive agency can transform spatial arrangements into places of memory, history, spirituality and community. Locomobile artefacts, in contrast, travel.¹² Inscribed weapons and jewellery are worn on the human body, creating close material assemblages between human, thing and text. Engraved artefacts that may be picked up, lost, or passed on invite us to consider the connections between material ownership, identity and agency.

Topological arrangements also determine how accessible an inscription may be. Since they represent materialised information, script-bearing artefacts are entangled with issues of publicity and privacy. Locostatic inscriptions marking public places

8 Bennett 2010, 23.

9 Deleuze/Guattari 1987. The term “assemblage” permeates *A Thousand Plateaus*, but is never explicitly defined. Deleuze/Guattari list a number of characteristics of the “*machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions” (88); emphasis in original.

10 Chaganti 2014 discusses medieval literary inscriptions with reference to *Gestalttheorie*. Cf. also Ricarda Wagner’s article on tablets in this volume.

11 The distinction is Konrad Ehlich’s; cf. Ehlich 1994.

12 For a more detailed discussion see Lieb/Ott 2014.

often aim to address a larger audience over a longer course of time, multiplying the possibilities for reception and communication. While their materiality makes most locostatic inscriptions easily available, other text-bearing artefacts are configured for closed and predetermined assemblages only, whose rupture renders them enigmatic. Investigating the topology and mobility of material writing, then, also leads to questions of community and the actions its members perform on and with inscribed things.

Practices

Assemblages between humans and artefacts are not only defined by states; topological proximity is not the only thing that binds material bodies together. Rather, humans and artefacts are connected through a series of actions which, when repeated and developed into routine, may become practices. When exploring inscriptions, the most relevant practices are those of reading and writing, categories understood broadly to include chiselling, engraving, embroidering, painting, etc. on the one side, and, deciphering, copying, memorising, glossing, quoting, translating on the other. To read an inscription may also be an act of iconographic interpretation as texts can also function as images. Even an illiterate person could recognise an assertion of the presence of the divine word in the golden script adorning the apex of a cathedral's apse, for instance. In addition to processes of creation and reception, epigraphic assemblages may encompass religious and magical practices such as cursing, blessing, healing and commemoration. Text-bearing artefacts that may be touched, handled and destroyed illustrate what can be done with writing once it becomes embodied in a material form.

In fact, it may be the thingly nature of text-bearing artefacts that invites humans to perform cultural practices on and with them. Like other material objects, inscriptions display "affordance", that is, the ability to provoke actions.¹³ While this may be a property of all material bodies, artefacts that bear text and hence initiate communication are particularly affordant. The famous inscription on the sword in the stone of Arthurian legend challenges the viewer to test his fate by grasping its handle; an engraved talisman incites the individual to wear it in order to enjoy its protection. Assemblages of humans and material things, then, encompass the needs of both parties, as human responses to thingly provocations help move objects along their own trajectories. Rather than thinking of practices as unilateral human performances on

13 The term "affordance" was originally coined by the psychologist James J. Gibson and has turned out fruitful for a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies. Cf. Fox/Panagiotopoulos/Tsouparopoulou 2015.

passive objects, this volume explores the thingly affordances that create and maintain epigraphic habits.

Cultural practices are subject to modification, of course. Alternatives to established routines may develop, favouring a new kind of writing material, for example, over the old standard. In literary texts, such a deviation may result from an individual choice or a change in conditions, and may be explained or commented on as well as ignored. Sir Gareth's inscribed golden helmet in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, for instance, is remarkable when all other weaponry in the same text is made of metal, a material that bears writing equally well, is less costly to acquire, and offers much better actual protection. Some artefacts such as wax tablets or gravestones are specifically fashioned to be inscribed; for other things being written on incorporates them into practices usually reserved for different kinds of artefacts. A lance engraved with the name of God, for example, overlays the practices of fighting and prayer, generating interferences worth investigating.

While an inscribed sword functions simultaneously as both war-gear and text-bearer, other artefacts turn into palimpsests when they are written on. The text they come to bear suspends their previous functions as blank things and reconfigures the relations within their material assemblages. We see this, for example, in Gahmuret's magnificent helmet cut entirely from a diamond in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. After Gahmuret's death, the helmet is inscribed with an extensive epitaph and placed on the hero's grave in a memorial assemblage that also includes his now equally defunct sword. Thus, the engraved helmet once worn close to the questing knight's body is now transformed from defensive tool into an articulate witness to Gahmuret's heroism long after the man himself has vanished.

Inscriptions may also repurpose an artefact repeatedly over a longer stretch of time. An inscribed artefact which is recycled, as it were, enters new assemblages, serves additional purposes, incites further actions, and takes on new meanings; it acquires a biography.¹⁴ One common example of such repurposing in the Middle Ages is the *spolium*, which Denis Ferhatović defines as “a significant artifact that complicates the boundary between temporal layers, natural elements, global and local, textual and visual, and animate and inanimate forces”.¹⁵ In architecture, the appropriation and redeployment of another society's prestige objects, often signalled by their inscribed nature, is a way of asserting one's own ascendancy, either through military conquest (as one might see on the Iberian peninsula) or cultural supercession (as with the Christian use of classical inscriptions in medieval Rome).

Humans, then, are not the only entities in material assemblages whose life-stories are interwoven with practices of writing. While the objects that have come down to us from the Middle Ages reveal clues as to which materials were favoured, medieval

¹⁴ Cf. Kopytoff 1986 and Gosden/Marshall 1999.

¹⁵ Ferhatović 2013, here 201.

texts allow us to observe how artefacts were created, refashioned, handled, perceived and recast with the help of inscriptions. By exploring not only epigraphic materiality, but also the practices around text-bearing artefacts, we gain fresh insights into the entanglements of humans and things in assemblages that encompass dynamic actions as much as fixed states, and imagined potentialities along with practical uses.¹⁶

For our study on medieval epigraphic materialities, topologies and practices, we draw on a corpus of narrated inscriptions collected at the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC 933) “Material Text Cultures” at Heidelberg University since 2011. Collaborators in the subproject “Inscriptionality” first catalogued narrated inscriptions in German medieval texts. Additional funding recruited experts in other literary traditions to extend the scope of the collection to include Old Norse, Old English, Middle English, and some Latin. As of March 2019, the open-access database covers about 250 texts and their text-bearing artefacts, ranging from the early Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, and is searchable by object, material, title or literary genre.¹⁷ This volume is an evolution of the database’s initiative, placing narrated inscriptions from Old French, medieval Iberian and Italian literary contexts alongside the initial Germanic corpus.

Our volume offers a series of readings that interpret a collection of narrated inscriptions from across what we now would broadly call medieval European literature. As inscriptions are an intersection of the material and the textual, the comparative scope of our study reveals significant cultural and regional differences in medieval attitudes to writing and thingness. In regions where monastic literacy prevailed, sheets of parchment were the main material for all sorts of writing. In early medieval Scandinavia, in contrast, wooden sticks engraved with runes were the medium of choice for everyday communication, and were remembered in literary texts long after the advent of Christianity and its distinct materiality.

The first part of this volume initiates our comparative project along the familiar lines of traditional national philologies, offering one chapter each on narrated inscriptions in medieval German, Old Norse, British, French, Italian and Iberian literatures. These chapters aim to throw into relief the idiosyncrasies of each literary culture with regard to materialities and writing practices. In this part of the volume, we have confined ourselves to vernacular literatures. Attitudes to the material, we hold, are particularly intertwined with the geographical conditions a culture has to contend with. As the Latin language functions as a medieval *lingua franca* that transcends the territories covered by different vernaculars, inscriptions narrated by Latin texts are incorporated into the appropriate chapters of the second part.

¹⁶ Cf. Hodder 2016, 13–18, who identifies a series of different “dependencies” between humans and things.

¹⁷ <http://inschriftlichkeit.materiale-textkulturen.de/inschriften.php> (last accessed: 30.05.2019).

Nevertheless, even as the first half of this volume works within the conventional limits of different philologies, individual contributions trouble the uniformity of medieval societies assumed by nineteenth-century nationalism. Modern national and linguistic borders do not always translate well to the map of medieval Europe onto which they were retrojected by the national need for a coherent historical narrative. The phantom of linguistic homogeneity has long obscured the presence of Celtic literature, for instance, in the creation of a medieval English literary tradition. Likewise, Anglo-Norman texts, fundamental to an emerging Insular literary corpus, tend to fall under the purview of French studies. The Iberian Peninsula with its multilingual and multicultural complexities provides another striking example. Literary texts from this region have survived in Old Castilian (Old Spanish), Old Provençal (Old Occitan), Galician-Portuguese (Old Portuguese) as well as Arabic and Hebrew, which means that Stephanie Béréziat-Lang's chapter on the text-bearing artefacts of the medieval Iberia cannot presume to speak for simply a "Spanish tradition". This collection intentionally includes bodies of literature from regions that have, until recently, been excluded from discussions of medieval European culture because of their positions on the peripheries of Latin Christendom. Cultural contact zones like the Iberian peninsula offer opportunities to interrogate the boundaries between East and West as they pertain to material culture.

Our collection not only delineates these borders, but also reveals them to be permeable. Both objects and stories travel with migrants, individuals and entire peoples, with merchants, minstrels, soldiers and refugees of war—with little regard for the borders that are now being dangerously fetishised in popular and political discourse. Long-distance exchanges of texts accompanied the colonial encounters of the Crusades, for example, and enabled the academic endeavours pursued by scholars and students moving between different scholarly centres that profited profoundly from the knowledge produced by Muslim scholars. Most significantly, the area we conventionally call medieval Europe is connected by dense interpersonal networks, both monastic and aristocratic. Men and women of the church, some place-bound, others wandering, share an ever-growing corpus of religious texts whose provenance in some cases lay far beyond the eastern borders of Roman Christianity.

Moveable texts did not simply travel, however. In the process of transmission, they were changed and adapted to relate more closely to the new context that received them. *Translatio* also denoted a "non-textual, non-linguistic transfer",¹⁸ one of political power and of knowledge (*translatio imperii et studii*). Medieval translations, then, are not only linguistic and philological enterprises, but cultural practices. They establish contact and negotiate seemingly foreign complexities; they bridge the gap not only between languages, but also between distinct or overlapping cultural zones and their materialities. By exploring the transformations script-bearing artefacts undergo

18 Campbell/Mills 2012, 7.

as they move from text to text, we analyse the idiosyncratic nuances that medieval linguistic and literary cultures attached to their own understanding of the written word and its powers. How do divergent material conditions of textuality, real and fantastical, vary across different regions, languages and alphabets? Do inscriptions represent a particular challenge for translation since they are second-order texts, that is: texts within a text? What difference does it make if an inscription is transformed from a Latin source or a vernacular narrative? Translating the romance of Alexander, for example, involves more than rendering the plot into another language. As several versions of the text feature intriguing narrated inscriptions on buildings, it also means translating a particular concept of material writing indigenous to Greco-Roman cities into Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian contexts, for instance, which lacked a literate urban public.

The second half of this volume takes its cue from these shared, travelling objects to explore perspectives on medieval culture whose categories are material rather than philological. These chapters, based on the research done by experts of different literary traditions, and developed in consultation with one another, focus on the materiality and thingliness of inscriptions in a multilingual selection of assemblages. We explore different types of text-bearing objects such as architectural elements, textiles, tombs, weapons, jewellery, and tablets. We also examine what meanings raw materials like bodies and skin, wood and stone may take on when inscribed, and how they contribute to the meaning of the inscriptions they bear. Several of these contributions specifically attend to text-bearing objects that have travelled between different literary traditions. The chapter on “Wood” by Michael R. Ott juxtaposes the ligneous inscriptions in Gottfried von Straßburg and Marie de France’s Tristan narratives, while the chapter on “Tablets” by Ricarda Wagner contrasts the waxen *écriture féminine* in the German and French versions of the *Eneas* romance.

Our methodological intervention in comparative literary analysis has certainly introduced some interesting challenges and discoveries. The ambition of a project that brings so many different scholars from diverse philological backgrounds together soon reveals that even as we now share an object of study, the ways in which we encounter the artefact and articulate our insights are informed by distinct disciplinary backgrounds. Consequently, this volume is also an experiment in collaborative scholarship which occasionally illustrates the different persuasive and deductive rhetorical strategies deployed in Anglophone, Italian, and German literary scholarship. The task of categorising text-bearing objects for the database also on occasion helped us to discover distinctive features in our own literary traditions. For example, the speaking objects of the Anglo-Saxon riddles emerge from Scandinavian skaldic poetry while also frequently drawing on a Latin Christian tradition shared with the Continent; and yet they are a genre unique to England. It stood to reason, then, that as we expanded our comparative scope for the volume, other contributors would also stumble across puzzling artefacts and literary contexts that both defied expectations and confounded simple categorisation.

Neither a familiarity with historical inscriptions nor a knowledge of uniquely literary devices could help us anticipate some of the artefacts we found. Because they do not fit neatly into the ideological boxes that serve to organise standard practices of medieval inscription, these artefacts focus our attention particularly on the meta-textual questions their material textuality raises. Thus, taking a cue from Renaissance collectors, those connoisseurs of thingliness, whose most extraordinary treasures were set aside to contemplate in Cabinets of Curiosities or *Wunderkammern*, this volume concludes with a collection of extraordinary text-bearing objects selected by contributors for the questions they raise.

A Cabinet of Curiosities is built from wonders, on a sense of awe at what things there are in the world. But it also evokes desire, the impetus to collect more items, to fill the gaps and assemble a more detailed multitude. This volume, too, aims to inspire further questions and collaborations. The immensity of the Latin and Old French literary traditions means we have only just scratched the surface of what they have to teach us about narrated inscriptions. There is still much to be gained, we believe, from placing into conversation Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions, as material writing had a very particular role to play for those the Quran terms the People of the Book. Likewise, we hope that subsequent studies of narrated inscriptions will be able to focus more microscopically on literary languages frequently overlooked by national studies, such as Irish and Welsh. Furthermore, studies which explore on a macroscopic level, narrated inscriptions in languages, such as Greek and Arabic, which were used across diverse regions offer the potential to investigate the intersections of material writing and empire.

A further line of inquiry would ideally move beyond the Eurocentrism of the present volume to attend to text-bearing artefacts in premodern African as well as East and Southeast Asian cultures, for example. The global perspective of the CRC 933 at Heidelberg University has shown that studies on material writing in ancient Mesopotamia, the early Chinese Empire and present-day Bali challenge us to think harder about the cultural conditions we have grown accustomed to expect of medieval Europe. If, as we noted, medieval studies began with a fascination for words and things, a re-engagement with the material conditions of medieval writing offers a way of shifting the conversations possible in our field. The multilingual, multicultural and transregional perspective on the “European” Middle Ages in this volume, then, is not only a contribution to the study of writing in non-typographical societies, but an intervention in how we conduct the discipline of medieval studies itself.

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