



VIEWING INSCRIPTIONS

in the Late Antique
and Medieval World

EDITED BY
ANTONY EASTMOND



Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World

Edited by

Antony Eastmond

Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107092419

© Cambridge University Press 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Viewing inscriptions in the late antique and medieval world / edited by Antony Eastmond
(Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London).

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-09241-9 (hardback)

1. Inscriptions – History – To 1500. 2. Visual communication – History – To 1500.
3. Civilization, Ancient – Sources. 4. Civilization, Medieval – Sources. 5. Mediterranean
Region – Antiquities. 6. Middle East – Antiquities. I. Eastmond, Antony, 1966–
CN77.V54 2015

929/.5-dc23 2014032617

ISBN 978-1-107-09241-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

VIEWING INSCRIPTIONS IN THE LATE ANTIQUE AND MEDIEVAL WORLD

Inscriptions convey meaning not just by their contents but also by other means, such as choice of script, location, scale, spatial organisation, letter-form, legibility and clarity. The essays in this book consider these visual qualities of inscriptions, ranging across the Mediterranean and the Near East from Spain to Iran and beyond, including Norman Sicily, Islamic North Africa, Byzantium, medieval Italy, Georgia and Armenia. Although most essays focus on late antiquity and the Middle Ages, they also look back at Achaemenid Iran and forward to Mughal India. Topics discussed include real and pseudo-writing, multilingual inscriptions, graffiti, writing disguised as images and images disguised as words. From public texts set up on mountainsides or on church and madrasa walls to intimate craftsmen's signatures barely visible on the undersides of precious objects, the inscriptions discussed in this volume reveal their meanings as textual and visual devices.

Antony Eastmond is AG Leventis Reader in the History of Byzantine Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. He has written extensively on the art and culture of medieval Georgia and its relations with Byzantium. He also works on Byzantine ivories. He is the author of *The Glory of Byzantium and Early Christendom* (2013), as well as *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium: Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond* (2008) and *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (1998). He has published articles in the *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* and *Speculum*. He recently held a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship during which he worked on a study of cultural interaction in eastern Anatolia on the eve of the Mongol invasions.

ILLUSTRATIONS ❷

1.	Inscriptions and rock relief of Darius I (522–486 BCE), Bisotun, Iran.	page 15
2.	View of the Gate of All Lands, Persepolis, Iran. Created by Xerxes I (486–465 BCE).	18
3.	Detail of the Old Persian inscription (center, above the wing) flanked by the Elamite and Babylonian versions on the interior of the northern wall of the Gate of All Lands, Persepolis, Iran.	19
4.	Cult Foundation of Antiochus III, Laodicea-in-Media.	21
5.	The Ka‘ba-ye Zardosht (foreground) with a partial view of the sites of Shabuhr I’s Parthian and Greek inscriptions (lower courses of masonry) with an Achaemenid tomb and Sasanian relief in the background. Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran.	27
6.	Sasanian stucco panel from Umm az-Za‘atir (near Ctesiphon) with Pahlavi letters possibly forming a monogram of Middle Persian <i>abzud</i> (‘increased’). Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin.	29
7.	Jubilee Doors, St. John Lateran, Rome.	37
8.	In situ section of graffiti at the Memoria Apostolorum <i>trichia</i> .	42
9.	Philae, Temple of Isis/Church of St. Stephen, south wall of hypostyle hall, west side of entrance, with insc. nos. 205–14.	43
10.	Graffiti-covered plaster fragments from the Memoria Apostolorum <i>trichia</i> .	45
11.	a. Graffiti wall at the shrine of St. Felix, Cimitile-Nola. b. Drawing of graffiti on left portion of graffiti wall at the shrine of St. Felix, Cimitile-Nola.	47
12.	Resafa, Basilica of the Holy Cross, detail of graffiti wall fragment B in situ.	49
13.	Reconstruction drawing of the interior of the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus, Rome.	50
14.	Reconstruction drawing of the entrance of the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus, Rome.	51

15. Resafa, Basilica of the Holy Cross, plan with location of graffiti wall and martyrium indicated. 53
16. Carved stone plaque set in the east façade of the Great Mosque of Sfax, recording the restoration of the mosque in 378 H/988 CE. 63
17. Carved marble slab to the left of the mihrab in the Great Mosque of Kairouan. 65
18. Kairouan, Great Mosque, Qubbat al-Bahu, interior. 67
19. Sousse, Great Mosque, replacement inscription over portal. 69
20. Mahdia, Great Mosque, portal showing empty entablature. 70
21. Inscribed marble plaque found in the Zawiyat al-Gharyaniyya at Kairouan. Raqqada, Museum of Islamic Art. 71
22. Kumurdo cathedral (Javakheti, Georgia). East façade, 964. 77
23. Kumurdo cathedral (Javakheti, Georgia). South porch, main tympanum. Inscriptions nos. 1 & 2, 964. 80
24. Kumurdo cathedral (Javakheti, Georgia). South porch, main tympanum. Inscriptions nos. 1 & 2, 964. 81
25. Ishkhani cathedral (Tao-Klarjeti, now in Turkey). Oratory chapel, north door. Inscription of Gurgun, king of Kartli, 994–1008. 83
26. Parkhali cathedral (Tao-Klarjeti; now in Turkey). South façade, inscription at arcade level, c.970. 86
27. Kumurdo cathedral (Javakheti, Georgia). South porch, Festival inscriptions, 964 to early eleventh century. 90
28. Kumurdo cathedral (Javakheti, Georgia). South porch, Festival inscriptions, 964 to early eleventh century. 91
29. Icon of St Symeon the younger commissioned by Antoni, bishop of Ishkhani, c.1015. 93
30. View of the south wall of the east end of the north church showing cloisonné bricks with pseudo-Arabic patterns, Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Byzantine, ca. 961, Phokis, Greece. 103
31. Detail of the stringcourse in the exterior apse wall of the north church showing carved pseudo-Arabic patterns, Monastery of Hosios Loukas, Byzantine, marble, ca. 961, Phokis, Greece. 105
32. Reconstruction drawing of the templon screen of the tenth-century north church, Monastery of Hosios Loukas, showing pseudo-Arabic marble carving. 107
33. General view of the bema and apse of the crypt in the katholikon (south church), Monastery of Hosios Loukas, first half of the eleventh century. 111
34. Detail of the pseudo-Arabic pattern in the north impost block flanking the bema of the crypt in the katholikon (south church), Monastery of Hosios Loukas, fresco, 1040s. 113

35. Presentation of Christ at the Temple, southwest squinch of the katholikon (south church), Monastery of Hosios Loukas, mosaic, 1040s. 115
36. Hagios Demetrios, soffit of the arch flanking the Presentation scene to the south, katholikon (south church), Monastery of Hosios Loukas, mosaic, 1040s. 116
37. Detail of Fig. 36 showing the pseudo-Arabic pattern on the shield held by Hagios Demetrios. 117
38. Hagios Prokopios, soffit of the arch flanking the Presentation scene to the north, katholikon (south church), Monastery of Hosios Loukas, mosaic, 1040s. 118
39. Palermo, Palazzo Reale, Cappella Palatina. The painted wooden ceilings of the nave and the two aisles, seen from below. 126
40. Palermo, Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia, inventory nos. 5104 & 5105. The two longest of the three fragments of Arabic verse inscriptions in *opus sectile* from the Cappella Palatina. 127
41. Palermo, Palazzo Reale, Cappella Palatina. Detail of a stellate coffer (south side, third from west) from the central zone of the painted wooden ceiling of the nave. 127
42. Palermo, Palazzo Reale, Cappella Palatina. Detail of panel at the base of the first large unit of the *muqarnas* zone from the west end on the north side of the ceiling of the nave, showing a male half-figure holding two crosses, above an Arabic inscription. 133
43. Palermo, Palazzo Reale, Cappella Palatina. Details of the Arabic inscription hidden in the intrados of the deep little niche in the centre of the fourth small unit from the west end of the north side of the *muqarnas* zone: *wa-l-yumn wa-l-kifāya wa-l-‘izz wa-l-...* ('bliss and capability and power and...'). 139
44. Palermo, Palazzo Reale, Cappella Palatina. Detail of a stellate coffer (south side, third from west) from the central zone of the painted wooden ceiling of the nave, showing (below) a pseudo-inscription composed of the letter *ṣīm* attached to an intertwined *lām-alif* (or *alif-lām*), followed by a reversed letter *ṣīm*. 141
45. The portal of the Qaratay Madrasa at the beginning of the twentieth century. 151
46. Qaratay Madrasa *ṛwān*, general view. 155
47. Qaratay Madrasa, general view of courtyard wall. 157
48. Qaratay Madrasa, southwestern 'Turkish triangle'. 158
49. Qaratay Madrasa, diagram showing the arrangement of the prophetic and caliphal names in the segments of the Turkish triangles. 159

50. Qaratay Madrasa detail of the inscription at the base of the dome. 161
51. Arabic and Hebrew epitaphs from the tomb of Fernando III in Seville cathedral, between 1252 and 1284. 171
52. Latin and Castilian epitaphs from the tomb of Fernando III in Seville cathedral, between 1252 and 1284. 172
53. Reconstruction of the converted mosque-cathedral at Seville. 173
54. Seal of the city of Seville, 1311 (left). Eighteenth-century drawing in Seville cathedral archive, MS. 57-3-40 (fol. 63r.). 175
55. Marmašēn, south façade, detail, founder's inscription. 189
56. Noravank', western façade of the gawit'. 191
57. Noravank', western façade, lower tympanum, with the Virgin and the Child. 193
58. Noravank', western façade, lower tympanum, with the Virgin and the Child. 195
59. Noravank', burial church of Prince Buhtel, inscription. 197
60. Noravank', western façade, upper tympanum as seen at the door of the gawit'. 199
61. Genoa, Cathedral of San Lorenzo. View of the central nave. 207
62. Genoa, San Lorenzo. View of north wall with dedicatory and foundation inscriptions and bust portrait of Janus, c. 1307. 208
63. Genoa, Cathedral of San Lorenzo. North wall, gallery, detail of the foundation inscription and sculpted effigy of Janus, c. 1307. 208
64. Genoa, Cathedral of San Lorenzo. South wall, detail of the junction between dedicatory and foundation inscription, c. 1312. 209
65. Genoa, Cathedral of San Lorenzo. South wall, central section of the foundation inscription, c. 1312. 210
66. Genoa, Cathedral of San Lorenzo. South wall, western section of the foundation inscription, c. 1312. 211
67. Signature of Khalaf between the hinges of the cylindrical box in the Hispanic Society of America D7532, c. 965. 232
68. Signature of Badr and Tarif on the underside of the clasp on the Gerona Casket, 976. Treasury of the Cathedral of Gerona. 233
69. Signature of Misbah under the throne on the front of the Pamplona Casket, 1004-5. Museo de Navarra, inv. no. 1360-B. 235
70. Signature of al-ʿAziz incised on the rear jamb of the lower left frame of the minbar made in Cordoba in 1137 for the Almoravid Mosque in Marrakesh. 237

71. Signature of Bichitr on the footstool beneath the enthroned Jahangir presenting a book to a Sufi, c. 1615–20. Freer Gallery 1942.15a. 240
72. Signature of ‘Ali ibn Muhammad al-Zammaki on a glass lamp made c. 1330 for Sayf al-Din Qawsun. Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.991. 241

CONTRIBUTORS

Sheila S. Blair Norma Jean Calderwood University Professor of Islamic and Asian Art, Boston College; Hamad bin Khalifa Endowed Chair of Islamic Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Sheila S. Blair is a historian of Islamic art who investigates both writing and illustration, especially the interaction between the two. Her latest book is *Text and Image in Medieval Persian Art* (Edinburgh, 2014). Among many other projects, she is currently preparing a chapter on the arts of the Mongol period and a paper on the reasons for illustrating historical manuscripts made during that period.

Jonathan M. Bloom Norma Jean Calderwood University Professor of Islamic and Asian Art, Boston College; Hamad bin Khalifa Endowed Chair of Islamic Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Jonathan M. Bloom has written on many aspects of Islamic art and architecture, but is particularly interested in the Mediterranean region, especially Islamic North Africa and Spain, in the medieval period. His most recent books include *The Minaret* (Edinburgh, 2013) and, with Sheila Blair as co-editor, *God Is Beautiful and Loves Beauty* (New Haven and London, 2013). He is currently working on a book about Islamic architecture in North Africa and Spain for Yale University Press.

Matthew P. Canepa Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities where he is a faculty member in the departments of Art History and Classical and Near Eastern Studies. Matthew P. Canepa earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. His research focuses on the intersection of art, ritual, landscape and power in the eastern Mediterranean, Persia and the wider Iranian world. His publications include *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, 2009), which was awarded the James Henry Breasted Prize from the American Historical Association for the best book in English in any field of history prior to 1000 CE, and the edited volume, *Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction among the Ancient and Early Medieval Mediterranean, Near East and Asia* (*Ars Orientalis* 38, 2010).

Antony Eastmond AG Leventis Reader in the History of Byzantine Art, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. Antony Eastmond has written

extensively on the art and culture of medieval Georgia and its relations with Byzantium. He also works on Byzantine ivories. He is the author of *The Glory of Byzantium and Early Christendom* (2013), as well as *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium: Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond* (2008) and *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (1998). He has published articles in the *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* and *Speculum*. He recently held a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship during which he worked on a study of cultural interaction in eastern Anatolia on the eve of the Mongol invasions.

Stefania Gerevini Assistant Director at the British School at Rome. Stefania Gerevini's current research focuses on the appropriation and meaning of Byzantine visual language in late medieval Italy, particularly Genoa and Venice, and on the conceptualizations and artistic applications of light and transparency in medieval art. Her recent publications include 'The Grotto of the Virgin: Artistic Reuse and Cultural Identity in Medieval Venice' (*Gesta*, 2014) and *Christus Crystallus: Rock Crystal, Theology and Materiality in the Medieval West* (British Museum Press, 2014).

Jeremy Johns Professor of the Art and Archaeology of the Islamic Mediterranean; Director, Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East, University of Oxford. Jeremy Johns is principally interested in relations between Muslim and Christian societies in the medieval Mediterranean as manifested in material and visual culture. His research has focused upon the archaeology of the transition from late antiquity to early Islam in the Levant and, especially, upon the archaeology, history and art history of Sicily under Islamic and Norman rule, from the Muslims' conquest of the island in the ninth century to the destruction of the Islamic community of Sicily by Frederick II. His recent and forthcoming publications include the first comprehensive study of the Islamic painted ceilings of the Capella Palatina in Palermo, as well as editions and studies of Arabic and bilingual documents from Norman Sicily. He is currently engaged in a multidisciplinary study of the medieval Islamic rock crystal industry.

Tom Nickson Lecturer in Medieval Art and Architecture, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. Tom Nickson's recent research has focused on encounters of Christian and Muslim texts and traditions in medieval Iberia, and their historiography. His book, *Toledo Cathedral: Building Histories in Medieval Castile* will be published in 2016.

Ioanna Rapti Director of Studies in the Department of Religious Studies in the History of Art and Architecture of the Byzantine World and the Christian Orient, École pratique des Hautes Études, Paris. Ioanna Rapti's research interests include Armenian iconography and court culture, historical geography of Armenian Cilicia, text and image, history of Byzantine art history and photoarchives.

Scott Redford Nasser D. Khalili Chair in the Art and Archaeology of Islam, Department of the History of Art & Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Scott Redford's most recent book *Legends of Authority: The 1215 Seljuk Inscriptions of Sinop Citadel, Turkey* was published in 2014 by Koç University Press in Istanbul.

Alicia Walker Assistant Professor, Bryn Mawr College. Alicia Walker's research focuses on cross-cultural artistic interaction between the Byzantine and medieval Islamic worlds and gender issues in Byzantine art and material culture. Her work has appeared in *Art Bulletin*, *Gesta*, *Medieval History Journal*, *Studies in Iconography*, *Ars Orientalis* and *Muqarnas*. Her first book, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Middle Byzantine Imperial Power*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2012.

Ann Marie Yasin Associate Professor of Classics and Art History, University of Southern California. Ann Marie Yasin's first book, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community*, appeared in 2009. Her current research examines evidence for the adaptation and renovation of early Christian churches to understand how alterations to the material fabrics of sacred structures shaped communal history and devotional practices over time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume has evolved from a series of meetings of a research network entitled *Viewing Texts: Word as Image and Ornament in Medieval Inscriptions*. The meetings, which were held between 2008 and 2010, were organised under the auspices of the *Beyond Text* programme that was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, under the direction of Evelyn Welch.¹ The project was jointly organised with Prof Liz James of the University of Sussex, whose aid and support throughout were invaluable. The network meetings, the website and bibliography (<http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/wordasimage/index.php>) were set up and administered by Stefania Gerevini with help from Eleni Dimitriadou and Laura Veneskey, to whom I am very grateful. The meetings were facilitated by Cynthia de Souza and Ingrid Guiot, staff members of the Research Forum at the Courtauld Institute.

The other members of the network included Timothy Greenwood, Bernard O'Kane, Arietta Papaconstantinou, Charlotte Roueché and Avinoam Shalem. Although they are not represented in this volume by essays, they are represented in spirit: their contributions to the discussions at the various meetings were invaluable in the formation of many of the ideas presented in this volume. I greatly appreciate all that they gave to the meetings, and hope that when they see this book, they will understand my gratitude to them.

¹ www.beyondtext.ac.uk

CONTENTS

<i>Illustrations</i>	page vii
<i>Contributors</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
Introduction: Viewing Inscriptions	I
<i>Antony Eastmond</i>	
ONE. Inscriptions, Royal Spaces and Iranian Identity: Epigraphic Practices in Persia and the Ancient Iranian World	IO
<i>Matthew P. Canepa</i>	
TWO. Prayers on Site: The Materiality of Devotional Graffiti and the Production of Early Christian Sacred Space	36
<i>Ann Marie Yasin</i>	
THREE. Erasure and Memory: Aghlabid and Fatimid Inscriptions in North Africa	61
<i>Jonathan M. Bloom</i>	
FOUR. Textual Icons: Viewing Inscriptions in Medieval Georgia	76
<i>Antony Eastmond</i>	
FIVE. Pseudo-Arabic 'Inscriptions' and the Pilgrim's Path at Hosios Loukas	99
<i>Alicia Walker</i>	
SIX. Arabic Inscriptions in the Cappella Palatina: Performativity, Audience, Legibility and Illegibility	124
<i>Jeremy Johns</i>	
SEVEN. Intercession and Succession, Enlightenment and Reflection: The Inscriptional and Decorative Programme of the Qaratay Madrasa, Konya	148
<i>Scott Redford</i>	

EIGHT. Remembering Fernando: Multilingualism in Medieval Iberia	170
<i>Tom Nickson</i>	
NINE. Displaying the Word: Words as Visual Signs in the Armenian Architectural Decoration of the Monastery of Noravank' (14th century)	187
<i>Ioanna Rapti</i>	
TEN. Written in Stone: Civic Memory and Monumental Writing in the Cathedral of San Lorenzo in Genoa	205
<i>Stefania Gerevini</i>	
ELEVEN. Place, Space and Style: Craftsmen's Signatures in Medieval Islamic Art	230
<i>Sheila S. Blair</i>	
Afterword: Re-Viewing Inscriptions	249
<i>Antony Eastmond</i>	
<i>Index</i>	257

☞ INTRODUCTION

VIEWING INSCRIPTIONS ☞

Antony Eastmond

WRITING AS ART

Inscriptions communicate. Whether they are royal proclamations, pious prayers, wise sayings, historical accounts or simple records of names, inscriptions were considered important by those who made and read them, and they have become crucial historical tools to modern historians. Yet, like all means of communication between humans, the information they contain is coded not just in the words that constitute the text but also in a wide variety of nonverbal forms.¹ In speaking, these nonverbal forms include the kinesic messages conveyed by gesture, posture, facial expression and movement. Inscriptions, whether inscribed on a monumental scale on the side of a mountain or carved in letters just millimetres high on an ivory casket, similarly rely on nonverbal elements – choices of script, scale, location, spatial organisation, letter style, clarity and legibility – for much of their meaning.

The chapters in this volume all address this nonverbal visual evidence, the *other* information embedded in inscriptions. They consider writing as art, not simply as an art form (the more traditional and well-established study of calligraphy, literally ‘beautiful writing’ from the Greek κάλλος and γραφή). Rather, they see inscriptions as important constituents of wider visual environments. All focus on inscriptions, whether painted, carved or formed from tiles and bricks: texts inscribed on the floors, walls and ceilings of buildings; chiselled on a monumental scale into the bare rock of cliff faces; or placed, barely visibly, on ivory boxes and glass lamps. They vary from royal proclamations, set up sometimes in three or four languages simultaneously and inscribed with great care and precision or with great effort in difficult-to-reach places, to graffiti hastily and illicitly

scratched into walls. These words are not simply representations of disembodied utterances. Once created, they become physical objects whose materiality is an essential element in the means by which they convey meaning.

This volume deliberately brings together scholars who work on a broad range of periods and fields that stretch all the way around and across the Mediterranean, from Spain to the Caucasus on the north side, from Tunisia to Egypt and Syria on the south, and with Sicily at its heart. Beyond the Mediterranean, they look to the Iranian world, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The chapters concentrate on the late antique and medieval worlds, but they look back to the fifth century BCE and forward to the seventeenth century CE. In the Christian world they move from late antique Rome to Byzantine Greece and Georgia around the year 1000. They examine Sicily in the twelfth century, Spain in the thirteenth, and Italy and Armenia in the fourteenth century. In the Islamic world the chapters range across the Umayyad, Aghlabid, Fatimid, Seljuk, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal realms; in Chapter 1 Matthew Canepa traces Sasanian and early Islamic practices in Iran to the epigraphic cultures of earlier Persian societies, the Achaemenids and Seleucids. Despite this extraordinary diversity in period and place, all the chapters are united by their interest in the ways in which groups in societies exploited the presence of writing to convey additional meanings beyond their verbal content. The aim of this chronological and geographic breadth is to encourage conversations across modern disciplinary, regional and period boundaries in academia and to explore the common uses of writing, as well as the particular differences employed by different cultures at different times.

Inscriptions have tended to be treated as collections of words, whose materiality is incidental. Such assumptions underlie the origins of the great corpora of inscriptions, which were often motivated by positivist concerns about the factual content that could be gleaned by reading such texts. The *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (RCEA), the great eighteen-volume corpus of Arabic historical inscriptions, for example, is completely unillustrated and only provides modern transcriptions and translations of all its Arabic texts.² With no interest in the appearance of any text, it is impossible to glean any of the kinds of information that the chapters in this volume seek to exploit. Even those corpora that do include photographs tend to use them primarily as a means to corroborate the editors' reading of the text itself, rather than as a source of additional information.³

The essential premise of this book is that inscriptions are not just disembodied words that can be studied in isolation. Instead they must be considered as material entities, whose meaning is determined as much by their physical qualities as by their contents. None of the chapters seeks to deny the importance of reading inscriptions. Indeed the contents remain important and are central to understanding the ways in which they have been set up and used. However, in addition to their contents, the ways in which words were presented to onlookers is a key source of information and a generator of meaning that should not be ignored.