
Introduction

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Preliminary Remarks

This volume presents a clearly structured and focused synthesis of the research undertaken over the past twelve years by the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre ‘Material Text Cultures’ (CRC 933) and aims to collate the CRC’s most important findings in a way that is at once concise, transparent, and accessible to a broad scholarly audience. With the CRC having come to an end in 2023, it is our goal and hope that as many scholars as possible will continue to work on its topics beyond this date and outside of Heidelberg. Furthermore, we hope that many will be inspired to take the foundations we have laid as a launchpad for making new contributions to the broad field of the materiality of inscriptions and manuscripts. The present volume has several aims: (1) to provide readers with an orientation in this field of research; (2) to be an easy-to-use guidebook and methodological aid for research on specific objects at the intersection of materiality, textuality, and practices; and (3) to serve as a reference work both for a theory of material text cultures and for studies on pre-modern cultures from the perspective of comparative cultural studies.

With this in mind, the volume has been divided into six thematic fields (Chapters 1–6) covering essential areas of the CRC’s research on material text cultures (see the overview below), with each chapter being written collaboratively by an interdisciplinary group of CRC members. Each chapter first defines the given subject area and provides an outline of the content, which is then followed by four to eight theses succinctly summarising the CRC’s most important insights and results in the respective area of research. Each thesis is then fleshed out, justified, or problematised. The theses’ discussions present individual examples and refer to further research completed by the CRC 933 in the years of 2011–2023 and by others. The volume thus offers a good introduction to the research landscape and to the extensive publications of the CRC as a whole. All 35 theses of this volume are additionally listed at the end of this introduction (each with its respective page number) for quick reference and an easy survey of all topics at a glance; the appendix with two indexes has also been prepared to this end.

This volume has been published in both German and English, with both versions appearing in print and being available online via open access. By their very nature, the two versions—the original and its translation—are not entirely congruent. Moreover, the concise formulation of the complex phenomena of material text cultures in the theses presented here has required in some places that different terminological decisions be made in both languages so as to ensure as much convergence of content as possible.

The CRC 933 ‘Material Text Cultures’ has focused on texts written on things: columns, portals, gravestones, clay tablets, pottery shards, amulets, bamboo splices, scrolls, manuscripts, and books made of papyrus, parchment, or paper, etc. Our interest lay in the materiality of these things as well as in their *presence*, i. e. the situations and spaces in which their effects unfolded. The practices, or ‘routinised’ actions of human actors, into which these things were once integrated, are closely interrelated to their material and presentic properties; some of these practices have been handed down to us from other sources, and some have to be inferred from the things themselves. We call such a connection of the material and practical dimensions in spaces and situations of things on which something is written (‘inscribed artefacts’) a ‘text culture’. Given our primary focus on materiality, we have studied ‘material’ text cultures, and have done so primarily in societies in which writing had not yet become available en masse through technical procedures of reproduction (what we term ‘non-typographic societies’). This strategic research decision assumed that the relationship between text, materiality, space, and related practices fundamentally changed as a result of the invention of printing, which in many cases led to a relative loss of meaning for the materiality of the individual inscribed artefact. An analysis of situations of material change within text cultures—notable examples being the inventions of paper and the printing press—serves to confirm this assumption as well as substantiate and differentiate it: how people dealt with texts and written materials did indeed change, even if the ‘inertia’ of established text cultures is often surprising, with the phenomena of selective persistence leaving a more lasting impression.

With non-typographic cultures at the core of the research presented here, we are thus dealing with text cultures situated in pre-modernity. The spectrum of fields ranges from Ancient Studies (Assyriology, Egyptology, Archaeology, Ancient History, Papyrology, Numismatics, Classical Philology, and Byzantine Art History), which also research the earliest preserved inscribed artefacts, to Medieval Studies (Medieval History, Art History, Medieval Latin, German Studies, Romance Studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies) as well as to specific fields analysing the early modern transition to the typographic age. With Chinese Studies, East Asian Art History, and Ethnology, we also take a look at past and present text cultures in China, Japan, Bali, and Java. Even if some disciplines are still missing, a large number of research fields have been brought together here and open up access to very different cultural areas. This makes it possible to develop a theory of material text cultures drawing from numerous individual case studies while also standing on the broad foundation of a comprehensive data set¹ and remaining aware of the inherently different dynamics of individual material text cultures.

1 Cf. the databases published online: <https://www.materiale-textkulturen.de/daten.php> (accessed 13/3/2023).

In its analysis of inscribed artefacts (historical, archaeological, and philological) over the past twelve years, the CRC has systematically developed and utilised an array of methods that is interdisciplinary in nature. The present volume is an attempt to bundle the findings and insights of this interdisciplinary work with regard to the contribution they make towards a theory of material text cultures, thereby also formulating such findings in a systematic way and offering them up for wider discussion and debate. This kind of result does not have the uniformity and systematic organisation that one might expect from theoretical texts which are usually presented by individual authors rather than by collaborative teams of writers. In the pages to follow, then, we understand by the concept of a theory of material text cultures a systematic compilation of well-founded and coherent statements ('theses') about material text cultures, as well as an exposition of the premises that essentially underlie these statements insofar as they guide methodological procedures and set forth epistemic goals. As explained in greater detail below, we have drawn primarily on theoretical models presented in the course of the material turn in the humanities. Whatever our theoretical outline presented here might lack in terms of uniformity is to be compensated for by the richness of the scientific approaches it incorporates and by the depth of the general statements based on concrete, close-up research. Nevertheless, this diversity is held together by the premises set out in the following two sections: namely, common theoretical foundations and a number of concepts and elements which have been identified as being important.

Foundations of a Theory of Material Text Cultures

The goal of the research programme developed in the CRC has been to produce textual scholarship that investigates and reconstructs text cultures through the material, spatial (topological), and praxeologically oriented analysis of inscribed artefacts. This programme is based on the hermeneutic premise that the textual meaning and cultural significance of an inscribed artefact are not something bestowed once and for all, but rather are constantly refashioned in the artefact's reception, and that these practices of reception are inseparably linked to the materiality and presence of the artefacts. Reception practices, however, encompass more than just reading: the memorising, singing, reciting, and copying of such inscriptions also fall under this umbrella, as do the practices of looking at, marvelling at, highlighting, concealing, and destroying such artefacts—not to mention all forms of (inter)acting *with* inscribed artefacts, such as spell-casting, warding off, protecting, damaging, worshipping, presenting, boasting, and so forth. Through this change of perspective, the inscribed artefact comes to be seen as having a great influence in shaping all the contexts of action in which it participates. At the outset, the praxeologically oriented reconstruction of a material text culture and its phenomena of presence method-

ologically requires restraint with regard to textual hermeneutics. First, the relevant materiality and topology are described, and based on this, the probable practices and effects of presence that constitute the material text culture under study are reconstructed. Such a praxeologically oriented analysis of artefacts in the process of reconstructing material text cultures is a special ‘hermeneutic strategy’ for understanding texts and their cultural meaning—a meaning that can sometimes deviate from, contradict, or be completely independent of the text’s possible semantic meaning.² Note that we understand hermeneutics explicitly *not* as an attempt to reconstruct an author’s original intent, but rather as a methodological effort to secure an understanding of a text in conjunction with the text culture(s) that can be culturally and historically determined as enveloping this text.

This strategic approach to research thus courses along two distinct, albeit inextricably linked, paths:

1. The hermeneutic dimension: The texts’ potential for sense and signification is not determined solely by the conventional philological methods of textual interpretation. First, the materiality of the text support and its spatial situation are recorded, and then the plausibility of likely reception practices is determined based on these, on the traces of use or other writings as well as the specific presence of the artefact. This praxeologically oriented analysis of the artefact is included in the interpretation of the texts, by means of which we go beyond the long-established hermeneutic practice of understanding texts from their historical contexts. ‘Context’ is more narrowly understood through the analysis of materiality, spatiality, traces of use, and the effects of presence, and is more controllable in terms of methodology than the inclusion of a broad and often arbitrary historical context in textual interpretation. Since efforts to gain understanding in this approach extend beyond the text to materiality, spatial surroundings, and practices, it can be understood as a methodologically ‘extended hermeneutics’, which can always have the result that the meaning of the text, initially thought as being obvious, becomes diffuse or is even negated.

2. The cultural-historical dimension: The praxeologically oriented analysis of inscribed artefacts renders plausible the presence of such artefacts in a specific cultural-historical situation, with such an analysis enabling us to sketch out a culture of texts that both surrounds and is constituted by the artefacts in question. Going beyond the level of textual content, it becomes clear that the meaning of inscribed artefacts themselves can be completely or partially independent of their textual content. The value and effect of an inscribed artefact, for example, are connected to its materiality (the material and effort behind its production) or can be inferred from where it was found or how it was received. Not infrequently, a tense or even contradictory relation-

² Hilgert 2010.

ship emerges between the textual meaning, the reconstructed effects of presence, and other aspects of a given artefact. The cultural-historical meaning of a text and/or of an inscribed artefact for a given social space—building on the technique of a methodologically extended hermeneutics—can thus also be determined independently of the textual content. The converse is also true: the cultural-historical elucidation of the textual culture surrounding an artefact can expand our understanding of the text's meaning. Based on these results, cultural-historical research can incorporate textual testimonies into its work in a methodologically sound new way.

The methodological and theoretical premises on which the two preceding dimensions are based built on the theories of the material turn and developed them further. Discussion of this turn was taken up by our research programme on material text cultures, first developed in 2010,³ when talk of these theories was still in its infancy in the German-speaking world. The focus then was on the status of 'thingness' and 'materiality' in cultural studies analyses, which had become increasingly important since the mid-1980s under the moniker of 'material culture studies'.⁴ By relating the typical focus of the material turn—on what is material, namely, things and thingness—to the special class of inscribed things, a deliberate advance was made towards the boundary between textual and material approaches to cultural-historical research. On the one hand, this pushes the ideas of material culture studies consistently further for text-related scholarship. On the other hand, more material-focused disciplines now place front and centre artefacts that have thus far often been 'consigned' to other disciplines due to their textual nature.

In order to situate the theory of material text cultures within the material turn of cultural studies, the main aspects of the more archaeologically/ethnologically oriented field of material culture studies should be noted here, as exemplified by (among others) Daniel Miller, Arjun Appadurai, Ian Hodder, and Henry Glassie,⁵ and as received by the broader material turn of cultural studies.⁶

³ Cf. Hilgert 2010 and 2016.

⁴ Cf. Woodward 2007; Miller 1987; Hahn 2005, 2015a, and 2015b; Hicks/Beaudry 2010; Samida/Eggert/Hahn 2014. See also Daston 2004; Hilgert/Simon/Hofmann 2018; as well as Lake 2020.

⁵ Cf. Miller 1987; Appadurai 1988; Hodder 1986; Glassie 1999.

⁶ On the material turn, cf. Reckwitz 2006 and 2008; Goll/Keil/Telios 2013; Samida/Eggert/Hahn 2014; Keupp/Schmitz-Esser 2015; Kalthoff/Cress/Röhl 2016; Samida 2016; and critically: Keupp 2017. The establishment of the material turn in the humanities can be seen, among other things, in its inclusion in very different subject areas and thematic fields. For example, most recently in Schreiber et al. 2016 on prehistory and early history; in Aronin/Hornsby/Kiliańska-Przybyło 2018 on multilingualism; in Caroll/Walford/Walton 2021 on anthropology; in Kotrosits 2020 on the history of early Christianity; in Hedreen 2021 on the literature of antiquity and its reception in the Renaissance; and in Tacke/Münche/Augustyn 2018 on the role of things in the didactics of history.

1. The turn towards things: Things are included in the study of cultures in a new way. The assumption is that the material presence of things is not incidental to, but constitutive of, our relationship with them. This presence influences both us and our actions. Cultural theories of the material turn are interested in how human action and cognition, and the material preconditions for both, mutually influence one another. This new consideration of things and their materiality is to be understood as a counter-movement to the linguistic turn,⁷ which had criticised and refuted the view that language was a neutral medium. According to its basic thesis, the way we speak to each other about the things of the world is what constitutes both us and things in the first place. This rather comprehensive claim on the part of the linguistic turn in cultural studies (as well as the constructivism of the cultural turn that builds on it) is restricted by material culture theory through paying new attention to things (as a non-linguistic field of phenomena).

2. ‘Textual analogy’: In some respects, however, the dawning of the material turn in the 1980s can also be seen as a continuation of the linguistic and cultural turns, which conceive of world and culture as a whole as being ‘text’, because of its premise that things can be read like texts.⁸ More recent material turn theories have criticised this premise, since what this entails is merely the appropriation of things with the aim of getting at their effectively dematerialised semantic meaning. Instead, such newer approaches call for a turn to things with respect to their almost individual independence and resistance.⁹

3. The de-essentialisation of meaning: The meaning of culturally formed things does not lie in the things themselves. Bjørnar Olsen describes the ‘textual analogy’ of the early theories of the material turn as the adoption of structuralist and post-structuralist theories into the study of material culture within the disciplines of Archaeology and Ethnology.¹⁰ The structuralist impetus lies in seeking the meaning of things not in themselves, but in the typified relations they have with each other and with whoever interacts with them. The poststructuralist impetus, in turn, radicalises the attitude towards the concept of meaning, with meaning always seen to be the result of a reception-centred process of negotiation. The meaning of a cultural thing arises individually and historically in each case. By de-essentialising meaning, the reception situation is accorded a radical increase in value vis-à-vis the production situation. Since meaning is now determined neither by the authority of an author nor by the relations of things, one must assume an openness of things to meaning and a

7 Cf. Bennett/Joyce 2010.

8 Cf. Hodder 1986; Tilley 1990 and 1991; on this, see also Olsen 2010.

9 Cf. Hahn 2015a and 2015b; Olsen 2010, 59–62.

10 Cf. Olsen 2010, chapter 2 (esp. 40–59).

‘semiotic surplus’¹¹ on their part. A multitude of other things, texts, and actors is connected to each thing, overlapping with and contradicting each other and thus entering into the meaning that is constructed in each case. Poststructuralist material culture studies emphasise how things have the meanings they do, in which situations and for whom, all while recognising that there is a plethora of possible meanings.

4. Praxeology: The design of this theory requires on the part of material culture studies a precise analysis of the reception situation or — more comprehensively — of the situation in which a thing was handled or acted upon. On the one hand, the methodological design of this analysis must be directed towards the surrounding culture as an ensemble of practices qua socially shared patterns of action. On the other hand, such design must also take into account the re-evaluation of the relation between things and people, which is conditioned by the shift in the generation of cultural meaning from producer to recipient and user.¹²

5. Actor-network theory: The relationship between things and people is understood as an interaction in which things are not passive, but rather have an effect on their recipients through their materiality and their spatial reality, thereby influencing the actions of these recipients and prescribing certain modes of action. To describe this character of the reception situation, theories of the material turn have drawn on the sociological theory of technology (Latour, Schulz-Schaeffer) or on the Theory of Science (Serres, Rheinberger, Knorr Cetina), both of which conceive of the interaction of people and things as being fundamentally symmetrical positions in human-thing networks. Especially Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT) has been taken up by material turn theories. ANT assumes a symmetrical relationship between things and people in systematically organised networks that enable joint actions. In this theory, based methodologically on the extremely precise and detailed empirical description of specific human-thing networks, objects are not treated as passive functions, but rather as independent actors (or ‘actants’, in Latour’s words).¹³

In summary, we can note the following. First, the material turn in cultural studies can be understood as a theoretically informed turn towards things and their materiality, which holds that this materiality must be included in the determination of cultural meaning. Further aspects of this change of perspective include, second, the assumption that the material world of cultural things can be read like a text; third, the post-structuralist de-essentialisation of the meaning of cultural things by stating that it is only generated through how things are received and actively handled; fourth, a con-

¹¹ Cf. Olsen 2010.

¹² On the practice turn, cf. Knorr Cetina/Schatzki 2001; Schatzki 1996 and 2003; Schüttelz et al. 2021; on ‘praxeology’, cf. Reckwitz 2006 and 2012; Elias et al. 2014; Haasis/Rieske 2015.

¹³ Cf. Latour 1996 and 2005; Schulz-Schaeffer 2000.

sequence of this being the turn towards practice and practices. Fifth, the interaction between things and people is understood as being one of independent actors/actants acting together in networks.

In forming its theories, the CRC 933 has adopted these elements of the material turn and developed them further in such a way as to enable the methodologically controlled analysis of inscribed artefacts and the formulation of an independent theory of material text cultures. We take a stand against the “privileging of [...] textual content”,¹⁴ focusing first on the material and topological reality of the text support and then trying—even if only partially—to reconstruct from this its specific presence and the practices that were probably related to it. The hermeneutic effort undertaken in order to understand the meaning of the text is not abandoned, but rather methodologically expanded and supplemented; admittedly, such a procedure could be understood as a semanticisation of the text support and its (cultural) environment and thus corresponding to the ‘textual analogy’ of the world of things as found in material culture studies.¹⁵ In this sense, the theory of material text cultures can be understood as a methodologically ‘expanded hermeneutics’ that encompasses the materiality, the spatiality, and the presence of what is written. Consequently, the material form, spatial situation, and practices surrounding what is written must also be ‘read’, as it were.

As mentioned above, the approach of material culture studies—namely, to read the world of things like a text—has long been subject to critique. Some critics have said that the ‘textual analogy’ approach has appropriated the world of things and loosened the tongue of this mute world, only to misunderstand it in the process by not taking a serious look at things with respect to their individuality, unwieldiness, and incomprehensibility, but rather by reading them like signs in a unifying way.¹⁶ Such criticism of material culture studies stands in the broader tradition of the critique of hermeneutics, which has always viewed the enterprise of determining meaning as an inadmissible simplification down to some original, authorised textual meaning. Now, this criticism would also apply—*ceteris paribus*—to the ‘extended hermeneutics’ we propose here, but we deal with this methodologically as follows. First, we stop only *reading* texts and instead also endeavour to describe their material and spatial conditions as precisely as possible. On the basis of this description—together with the inclusion of traces of use, as well as contemporary texts that speak of the handling of texts (so-called ‘metatexts’)—we seek to determine what practices could have been plausibly carried out on or in conjunction with the inscribed artefacts in question. This descriptive reconstruction methodologically expands the conventional forms of hermeneutics that focus on one meaning of the text, while also aiming to assess the cultural presence of inscribed artefacts. Materiality, spatiality, and practices are thus not ‘read’ in the literal sense, but are rather described as precisely as possible.

¹⁴ Hilgert 2016, 255, our translation, German text: “Privilegierung des [...] Textinhalts”.

¹⁵ Cf. Olsen 2010, 42.

¹⁶ Cf. Hahn 2015a and 2015b; Olsen 2010.

Second, this approach can disrupt the hermeneutic concern of understanding texts in the classical sense: materiality, presence, and practices can stand in a tense relationship with the meaning of the text and even contradict it. One therefore cannot speak of an appropriation of inscribed artefacts through conventional forms of hermeneutics.

With this poststructuralist view of inscribed artefacts as being signs that bear meaning, material text culture theory adopts the premise of the material turn's de-essentialised meaning of things in a more consistent way. The presence of texts, their materiality, topology, and use (i. e., practices) are all taken into account; yet the focus is no longer on the illusion of some authorial intent claiming sole validity, but rather on the analysis of scenarios of reception and handling, in which the meaning of a materially and spatially present inscribed artefact arises or is created by means of various practices. Authorship and text production still do play a role: they are to be understood as the initial attribution of meaning. However, since they do not hold any privileged status for the methodologically expanded hermeneutic approach vis-à-vis subsequent or competing attributions of meaning, such an approach allows us to take better account of the fact that some texts, such as epitaphs or inscriptions in sacred space, do not suggest any meaning-defining authorship at all. Finally, this also brings into view the fact that if actions are constitutive of meaning, then so too is the act that we ourselves as scholars perform when investigating inscribed artefacts. Text culture is thus the temporally unfinished context of understanding that encompasses inscribed artefacts and that must be taken into account in order to understand them.

The theory of material text cultures thus assumes that the meaning of a text is not fixed, but rather emerges on the side of reception, whereby 'reception' encompasses a multitude of possible activities with reference to the inscribed artefact in question and its presence. The focus on the emergence of textual meaning and of the cultural significance of textual artefacts in acts of reception also requires a concentration on practices. For this reason, our research approach is praxeologically oriented.¹⁷ The cultural meaning of writing is thus by no means to be understood in a subjectivistic way. The praxeological turn of the hermeneutically de-essentialised theory of material text cultures consists in reconstructing the meaning of what is written from those practices in which the writing was probably embedded. In doing so, the premise that meaning is assigned 'from without' does not contradict the fact that certain such assignments are relatively stable in routinised contexts of action (= practices). Furthermore, not every conceivable practice is equally plausible, so that the assignment of textual meaning and cultural significance is by no means arbitrary. The reconstruction of plausible reception practices via material(s), traces of use, spatial location, and contemporary texts on the handling of texts or pieces of writing plays a central role in the application of the theory of material text cultures.

¹⁷ This praxeological shift to the reception-side production of textual meaning and the cultural significance of inscribed artefacts, which are both thus strongly dependent on specific material presence, is what Markus Hilgert has called "text anthropology" (Hilgert 2010 and 2016).

To describe these practices, the theory of material text cultures takes into account the action-structuring effect ('agency') of the material condition of writing as an element of a network-like interrelationship between human actor and inscribed artefact ('actant'). As in most theories of the material turn, this interrelation can be described with the help of the above-mentioned actor-network theory (ANT) in order to capture accurately the relationship of inscribed artefacts to the persons acting on or in conjunction with them. However, talking about things as 'actants' implies an often too strong assumption, especially for praxeologically oriented research. Our conception of the 'agency' of things as an action-structuring effect, rather than as a direct form of agency, draws the necessary conclusions from this. Moreover, Latour's ANT is based on a very precise description of empirically accessible relationships of cause and effect and on comprehensive data sets that are simply no longer available for past cultures.

The interrelation of inscribed artefacts and human actors can therefore be better understood as a 'material arrangement'.¹⁸ Schatzki understands a material arrangement as a "set of interconnected material entities" that can include people and things. They "can be segregated into four types: humans, artefacts, organisms, and things of nature".¹⁹ In contrast to Latour's ANT, Schatzki complements the social phenomenon of 'material arrangements' with the social phenomenon of practices.²⁰ All "human coexistence [...] inherently transpires as part of nexuses of practices and material arrangements";²¹ Schatzki then names four such nexuses: "causality, prefiguration, constitution, and intelligibility",²² assuming a primary connectedness of human practice and materiality and thus regarding materiality as being originally constitutive and irreducibly formative for social life. The agential character of the material can be considered on a case-by-case basis in this model, but in contrast to the network-like connectedness in material arrangements of people with things, it need not be considered as a determining factor for all contexts of practice. With this methodological correction, we can make fewer presuppositions for the praxeologically oriented research of inscribed artefacts than is necessary for material culture studies. Material text culture theory thus becomes more accessible, especially for the study of societies and cultures that cannot be observed in as much detail as would be required by ANT, which was originally developed for the analysis of modern science.

We have thus linked into the theories of the material turn by taking up its focus on the materiality of writing and its premise of the de-essentialisation of writing's meaning, together with the concomitant praxeological orientation and a non-subject-centred form of the interplay of inscribed artefacts and human actors. Nevertheless,

¹⁸ Cf. Schatzki 2003 and 2010.

¹⁹ Schatzki 2010, 129.

²⁰ He defines practices as "organized spatial-temporal manifolds of human activity [, e. g., ...] cooking practices" (Schatzki 2010, 129).

²¹ Schatzki 2010, 129.

²² Schatzki 2010, 139.

we have reshaped the premises (which at this point have already undergone change in comparison with material turn theories) by attempting to give them the overall form of a specific theory of material text cultures: namely, one that decidedly encompasses (and restricts itself to) inscribed artefacts. This theory approaches the meaning of texts and the cultural significance of inscribed artefacts with an ‘extended hermeneutics’ in mind. This approach retains a special feature compared to the material turn, because material text culture theory always refers to *inscribed* artefacts, and thus specifically to artefacts in which the tense, sometimes contradictory relationship between the meaning of a given text and the respective meaning assigned to the artefact as a whole in the various practices of reception must be dealt with.

The theory of material text cultures assumes that the materiality of texts and the presence associated with it are themselves constitutive of meaning. This applies both to the meaning of the text as well as to the cultural-historical significance of an inscribed artefact. Materiality and presence are intertwined with the actions in which the artefacts are involved. For the reconstruction of meaning, then, the determination of this context of action is of paramount importance, with the result that the hermeneutic effort to find a pure textual meaning intended by a given author tends to take a back seat. Material text culture theory can thus also deal with practices in which inscribed artefacts play a role, but where the semantics of the text is not accessible to the actors (or the majority of them). In such cases, what is written acquires a cultural-historical meaning independent of the textual semantics. For the theory of material text cultures, the documenting of arrangements and personal networks in which writing is integrated is at least as relevant as the philological analysis of the text found on the material. In order to understand the meaning of writing in a given culture, material text culture theory also methodically includes texts in which writing per se and the specific written word(s) are discussed (‘metatexts’, see below).

The theory of material text cultures, and its application presented here, was initially developed especially for the subject area of pre-modern text cultures, the reason being that the absence (or deliberate non-practice) of techniques of mass reproduction of writing influenced both the latter’s specific valence and presence as well as writing-related practices more generally. Yet, while the theory may be more adequate for pre-modern text cultures, it is not without value for modern or post-modern digital text cultures, since even under the conditions of ubiquitous writing or digital information processing, the materiality of what is written—perhaps precisely in its fleeting character and in the individual worthlessness of the specific artefact—develops its own forms of presence and associated practices. These, too, can be understood by a theory of material text cultures.

Concepts and Elements of a Theory of Material Text Cultures

In order to avoid repetitive definitions of terms in the individual chapters and theses, we explain here briefly the most important terms and elements of a theory of material text cultures.

Text / What is written

For the discussion of a theory of material text cultures, a fundamental decision was made not to talk about cultures of *writing*, but about *text* cultures. The theory of material text cultures is not concerned with research on writing in general, if we understand this as the totality of referential, present, and operational signs (i. e., disjunctive signs that are basically applied in accordance with a rule-based system).²³ Nor is it concerned with investigating the specific characteristics of different ‘cultures’ shaped by writing in the sense of a comparative analysis of one or more cultures possessing a writing system with other, purely oral societies. Rather, material text culture theory is concerned with researching the relationships between what is written, the materiality of this writing, and its specific presence within a historical constellation. Writing and written scripts should be seen as only one part of the cultural practice and reception of the act of writing, which also includes writing implements, materials, areas for writing, scenarios of writing, texts, text producers, scribes, people reading to audiences and people reading just to themselves, etc.²⁴ Concentrating on scripts and writing per se against the backdrop of this diversity of text-related practices would be too narrow a focus; furthermore, doing so would not enable us to answer the question of determining the materially composed cultural meaning of what is written.

At the same time, we have taken pains in our studies not to have too broad a concept of the term ‘text’; we have been exclusively concerned with materially present texts on (material) artefacts and thus we have not taken into account instances of (to a certain extent mentally present) ‘repeated speech’ in different situations, which could also be meaningfully described as a ‘text’.²⁵ To clarify this distinction conceptually, we often speak of ‘the written’, ‘what is written’, ‘written things’, or ‘the written word’ as opposed to ‘writing(s)’ in a more general sense. Compared to a detemporalised, dematerialised concept of text, this set of expressions has the advantage of conceptually representing the action on the artefact: the material production of the texts, the preparation of the material to be inscribed, the act of writing itself, etc. As ‘written

²³ Cf. Grube/Kogge 2005.

²⁴ Cf. Zanetti 2012.

²⁵ Ehlich 1994; Lieb 2015, 3; Lieb/Ott 2016.

things', texts become recognisable as both the result of and participant in various practices. In this way, a praxeologically oriented theory can already conceptually depict an expanded spectrum of textual functions.

By 'text culture', we mean: the specific context of the materials, places, and practices pertaining to what is written; the inscribed artefacts themselves; and the prevailing attitudes towards writing and written things, such as they can be reconstructed in texts and actions. Text cultures can be reconstructed for historical spaces and times and thus help to determine the (purely semantic) meaning of texts through their significance as forming part of a text culture—a culture which for its part can be very diverse and not always aligns smoothly with the content of the text itself.

Artefact

Since all things on which something is written exist as *made* things *inasmuch* as they are inscribed, we call these things '**artefacts**'. This is immediately obvious for text supports such as clay tablets or pieces of parchment that entail labour-intensive means of production requiring the use of specific skills or crafts (Lat. *artes*). But even etched stones or tree bark have an artefactual character in their capacity as text supports, and in this way, the cultural moulding of the objects under study is emphasised.²⁶ We also use the term 'artefact' instead of 'object', which—mainly due to its counter-term 'subject'—establishes an asymmetrical relation between human actors and things, both from the outset as well as after the production process. The concept of artefact also points to the material arrangements in which text-bearing things, and the people who act on and in conjunction with them, are located: these can be producers, recipients, archivists, etc.; or even actors in magical practices that imply inscribed artefacts.

As already stated above, one of the most important methodological decisions made by the CRC has been that of a kind of hermeneutic restraint. The texts from past cultures that have come down to us as artefacts, and the presence of such texts, are *not first* subjected to a textual hermeneutic analysis of the meaning of the text at the level of the textual content. Rather, our first step is to analyse and describe a given text with a view towards its material, topological, and praxeological dimensions. Consequently, this means that the artefacts are not understood as being random, interchangeable, and ultimately insignificant bearers of writing, but rather are taken seriously as essential components of an interaction that takes place between artefacts, texts, and people. Even the respective material quality of the stuff and matter intended for inscription that has not yet been processed and shaped can lend itself conspicuously to human actors to this very end ('affordance'). The same applies to

26 Cf. Reckwitz 2006 and 2008; Lueger 2000; Hurcombe 2007; Margolis/Laurence 2007; Eggert 2014.

the processed artefact, which also has its own affordances due to its materiality.²⁷ Artefacts are more than just material remnants on which traces of past action can be discerned or 'read'. According to theories of praxeology, such artefacts form a constitutive component of practices.

For this reason, we have also decided against predominantly using terms like 'media', 'written media', and the like. It has long been clear in the field of media theory that media are not merely empty vehicles that simply transmit messages unaltered from sender A to receiver B; rather, media themselves communicate, bear intrinsic meaning, and leave indelible traces in the transmitted content. Nevertheless, the concept of medium evokes a primacy of communication, of transmission intentions on one side and reception on the other. For a theory of material text cultures, this fixation on the communicative functions of inscribed artefacts falls short, since it does not take into account the numerous other functions such artefacts have: the practice of magic; the commemoration of people, places, things, and events; the wielding of power and/or authority; the ability to injure or harm; the manifestation of various kinds of presence; etc. Even if a sender-receiver structure can be identified in a certain sense for every use of writing and for every inscribed artefact, the message is by no means always identical with the textual content: a single word carved in huge letters in marble—a name, for instance—does not 'mean' its textual content, but rather the artefact as a whole has a culturally ascertainable meaning. Talking about written media obscures the fact that the artefact itself, in its entirety—in terms of production, material, installation, accessibility, etc.—has a meaning within a given culture, of which the meaning of the textual content can in no way be detached.

By speaking of inscribed artefacts, we wish to indicate the materially and praxeologically oriented dimension of our studies. The generalised (albeit not dogmatic) decision against using such terms as 'object' and 'medium' thus goes hand in hand with this theoretical framework, given our view that artefacts serve as action-guiding positions in arrangements. Furthermore, we also hold that in order to understand such artefacts, one can never only take the textual content into account, but must also always bear in mind the interrelation of the artefacts' material and semantic aspects.

Materiality – Topology – Presence – Metatexts

In order to explore the cultural meaning of inscribed artefacts and their specific presence in a given historical situation, we have developed a heuristic for the reconstruction of text cultures. The methods include describing the materiality as precisely as possible and, in connection to this, describing the spatial situation, insofar as it is still recognisable or able to be reconstructed. From both perspectives ideally (usually

²⁷ Cf. Gibson 1977.

this means: with sufficient historical records), it is possible to draw conclusions about practices in which the artefacts played a role. In doing this, we are not primarily concerned with one-off actions of individuals on inscribed artefacts. Rather, the cultural significance of what is written is derived from practices, i. e., from actions that occur with relative frequency and regularity. Since material and spatial analysis in itself is often only fragmentarily possible, and since the pertinent actions (whether one-time or routine) cannot be observed by us (anymore), we consult texts about writing in general and specific instances of the written word that originate from, or were demonstrably received by, the culture under consideration. We call these texts ‘metatexts’ (in a departure from the usual literary and scientific usage of this term). Such metatexts are of great help in identifying probable text-related practices and consequently in understanding a text, a text-bearing artefact, and the text culture associated with both.

Materiality is best explained in the context of, and in distinction to, the terms ‘matter’ and ‘material’.²⁸ ‘Matter’ is the physical substance of which a thing is made. In the theoretical framework presented here, ‘material’ also denotes the physical substance, but from a different perspective: namely, matter insofar as it has been culturally shaped and/or changed by humans. This altering and shaping takes place when an artefact is produced; material is matter that has been made available to and for cultural ends. Materiality, in turn, refers to the concept that an artefact (or the writing on an artefact) has physical matter and that this matter determines the artefact in a specific way. The concept of materiality draws attention to this feature, to the ‘made-ness’ from matter on the part of artefacts and what is written, and to the possibilities and practices of matter-related manipulation and the attribution of meaning.

In order to adapt to one’s specific research topic, it makes sense to further differentiate between two aspects of ‘materiality’. A narrower meaning of the term has in mind the artefacts’ ‘matter’: this could be clay, stone, parchment, etc.—that is, whatever type of matter that has been culturally (trans)formed into ‘material’. By contrast, a broader understanding of the term, also allows for the description of the formal arrangement of external elements—e. g. format, layout conventions, text-image arrangement, etc.—or the aesthetic dimension of an artefact as genuine component of its material agency.

Topology focuses less on the materiality of an artefact than on the latter’s spatial dimensions. This could be the location of a text within an ensemble of other texts, artefacts, and spaces surrounding it; architectural arrangements that make specific practices and perspectives possible; and so on. Topologies thus serve to capture artefact arrangements as well as provide clues for further specifying the kind of presence accorded to the artefacts and what effects were believed to emanate from this presence. Since the so-called spatial turn in cultural studies, the aspect of space itself has also come increasingly to the fore in historical analyses. Space is considered both

²⁸ Cf. Appadurai 1986; Benne 2015; Miller 2005; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2010; also Meier/Focken/Ott 2015, 19–26.

as a topographically measurable quantity as well as something which can be non-topographical in meaning (for instance, when we speak of ‘virtual space’ or of the ‘liturgical space’ evoked by a text).

In many ways, the space in which inscribed artefacts are present determines their reception practices. The surrounding space defines how people perceive such artefacts, whether via reading or merely by looking or gazing at them; and at times it incorporates the artefacts into the practices that take place within it. In case of restricted accessibility, space determines the group of people who alone can see the artefacts or even who has them at their disposal. Furthermore, space may transfer its own character and status to the inscribed artefacts located in it.²⁹ Conversely, however, these artefacts can also participate in the constitution and characterisation of the space in which they are present. Thus, writing—for example, in or on churches—can secure the sacred status of a space as well as internally differentiate and structure it. Or, in the case of ancient sanctuaries, writing can mark such places’ boundaries and formulate rules of appropriate behaviour in and around them. Through the progressive accumulation and concentration of mutually referential inscriptions, ancient and medieval urban spaces can even acquire the memorial and authoritative character of a public ‘archive’. Finally, topology can also be used to look at the spatial dimension of what is written on the artefact itself. Inscriptions on buildings or statuary monuments can ‘guide’ users and viewers in their perception of, and movement within, space. If the inscribed artefact has the manageable dimensions of a leaf of parchment or an inscribed stele, the writing’s topology touches on aspects of layout as well.

By **presence**, we mean the way in which an inscribed artefact was ‘at hand’ as an element of material arrangements and integrated into practices. Our concept of presence thus does not aim at mere localisation, but rather at the praxeological dimension of inscribed artefacts. It is important to note that presence does belong to an artefact *sui generis*, but is often intended and consciously produced.³⁰ This aspect comes into its own particularly when considering both the material of artefacts and their spatial situation. In describing inscribed artefacts, we try to capture the way in which the artefact was visible or tangible for actions on and with it, or how the artefact functioned within the material arrangement. For the presence of an inscribed artefact, then, both its affordances—its inherent offers or invitations to action—and its topological integration are decisive. We can note in this context a particularly interesting borderline case of presence: namely, that of restricted accessibility. Some inscribed artefacts were deliberately withdrawn from the sphere of action and often even from the realm of the visible. Even this (non-)relationship to (a given) space and the people in that space is central to how we understand an artefact or a text culture. Quite often,

²⁹ Cf. Frese/Keil/Krüger 2014.

³⁰ Cf. Allgaier et al. 2019, 194–197.

the spatial location (if it can be reconstructed at all) defies easy explanation. We find inscriptions placed so high up that no one can read them; sealed lead tablets in wells and fountains; precious manuscripts accessible to only a very select group of people. Such examples—where what is written resists simple explanations of its use—pointedly demonstrate the integration of inscribed artefacts into their own text cultures and thus bear for us special heuristic value.

Describing the presence of an inscribed artefact is explicitly not an anti-hermeneutic strategy for us, as it is in the case of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who has played presence and hermeneutics off each other.³¹ According to Gumbrecht, Western intellectual history—with its fixation on intelligible meaning—must be counterbalanced by taking into account what comes into view (the ‘*Präsentisch-sich-Ereignende*’) in its aesthetic and sensual qualities. With regard to the specific case of inscribed artefacts, by contrast, material text culture theory emphasises that the experience of presence and the hermeneutic search for textual meaning usually occur simultaneously and mutually influence one another. This is because the meaning of a text also only ‘comes into view’ (‘*ereignet sich*’) in the reception situation and in the recipient, and therefore cannot be separated from the presential effects of the material and spatial givenness of the text.

Since it is often no longer possible to ascertain the historical placement of inscribed artefacts, the topological description, and thus the reconstruction of the intended or actual effect(s) and practice(s) of such artefacts, is a particularly sensitive methodological point. A prominent role in this context is played not least by **meta-texts** (“writings about the written”),³² which we define following the common use of the term (albeit slightly differently) in literary studies.³³ For us, ‘metatexts’ are texts in which inscribed artefacts and the human actors and practices associated with them are described, narrated, or discussed. Such metatexts—where extant—often offer insights into precisely those aspects no longer accessible in the physically preserved artefacts. Metatexts help us to reconstruct the practices carried out on and with writing. It can be observed time and again though that the metatextual representation of inscribed artefacts and the practices connected to them do not necessarily reflect historical reality. Yet in any case, the depictions preserve and reflect practices and (conceivable) possibilities that can be very valuable for understanding the text cultures to which such metatexts belong. In this context, self-referentiality should be mentioned as an important form of metatextuality, which is of special interest to the CRC’s central question of the constitution or reconstruction of meaning when reflection on the production and nature of the writing is made in the very same text. Last but not least, the analysis of fictional, at times fantastic or unreal writings, offers an important complement and sometimes even a corrective to artefact-centred research,

31 Cf. Gumbrecht 2003.

32 Cf. Hilgert 2010, 95–95, our translation, German text: “Geschriebenes über Geschriebenes”.

33 On this, cf. Focken/Ott 2016b.

because it can show what kinds of meaning and possibilities were generally attributed to writing within a given culture.³⁴

Overview of Thematic Fields and Theses

The synthesis of the research at the CRC 933 was carried out in a concentrated fashion within six interdisciplinary thematic field groups. More theoretically fundamental questions were bundled in the thematic fields ‘Reflecting on Writing and Writtness’ (Chapter 1), ‘Layout, Design, Text-Image’ (Chapter 2) and ‘Memory and Archive’ (Chapter 3). These thematic areas deal with basic questions concerning the function and effect of writing in its material constitution as well as such writing’s associated design, spatial location, and evoked presence. These sections are also where the relationship of a theory of material text cultures to recent theory formation is outlined. Writing in its own effectiveness beyond functions of communication is the subject of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 gathers thesis-like considerations on the material design of writing and its relationship to other elements on an artefact’s surface and/or surrounding area; here, the relationship between text and image, as well as the iconic quality of writing (‘Schriftbildlichkeit’), also play a role. Chapter 3 deals with the commemorative and archival function of writing, since the frequently intended (but often, also accidental) survival of writing over time is so fundamentally connected with its materiality that these functions also play an important role in cases where an inscribed artefact was not produced specifically as a storage medium.

The thematic field of ‘Material Change’ (Chapter 4) deals with the (dis)appearance of material text supports, of new technologies, and the cultural practices related to such technologies: that is, the processes that lead to a medium- to long-term change in the material presence of inscribed artefacts within a culture. The initial hypothesis of the CRC was that in societies in which techniques for the mass reproduction of texts are not (yet) available, specific ways of handling what is written—and thus specific text cultures—develop. The latter display specific connections between text, materiality, spatiality, presence, and related practices: connections that can be understood quite well, for instance, in historical situations of change. Especially vivid examples of these historical changes are the transition in material from parchment to paper, or the change in format from the scroll to the codex. This is even truer since these changes never happened suddenly, but rather often took place only partially or were completely rejected at first.

The thesis-like reflections of the four thematic fields of a more general nature are followed by two thematic fields dealing with specific concentrations of cultural and social functions of writing: namely, ‘Sacralisation’ (Chapter 5) and ‘Political Rule and

³⁴ Cf. Focken/Ott 2016a; Wagner/Neufeld/Lieb 2019.

Administration' (Chapter 6). The theses have been brought forward in a cross-cultural comparative manner on definable areas of social practice pertaining to the cultic/religious and political/administrative spheres, respectively. In so doing, it has not been our intent to level the enormous cultural-historical differences between cultures, nor have we sought to deny the fact that the modern concept of 'religion' was not at all realised as such in many cultures, or that in some cultures, the political sphere cannot be meaningfully separated from that of the religious/sacred. Nevertheless, there are areas in every culture that can be addressed more specifically with regard to practices of administration or to matters pertaining to the realm of the sacred. The comparative research on text cultures belonging to different social spheres is to be understood as heuristic in nature. Not only does this section of the present work show that the social spheres diverge strongly when compared across times and cultures, but also that different text-related practices prevail in different spheres within a society. Be that as it may, pre-modern text cultures can be studied comparatively in this way, with similarities and differences in text-related practices and attitudes identifiable in similar social spheres.

The bundled theses of these thematic fields are comprehensive neither in terms of the quantity of possible social spheres nor in terms of the multiple historic text cultures. Nevertheless, the studies presented here are meant to be paradigmatic in nature and can demonstrate the productivity of a theory of material text cultures in a comparative cultural perspective. This research programme is not complete, nor is it intended to be.

As mentioned above, we list at the end of this introduction all the theses in the order in which they appear in the present volume. They do not present a completely uniform picture, since the individual chapters address material text culture(s) quite differently: not only from a thematic viewpoint, but also in terms of their respective methodological approaches. This heterogeneity shows that the collected theses are not intended to represent a closed or finite theory. It also reflects the diversity of the research that has been included in the theses: text- and matter-analytical approaches, historical-descriptive and transhistorical-theoretical research, postmodern cultural studies and basic research into material as defined above and as conducted during the existence of the CRC spanning more than a decade. Often, these different approaches have intertwined with one another; sometimes, they have merely stood side by side as findings of different kinds. It should also be taken into account that the theses in this volume cover neither the entire research and labour of the CRC nor the topic of material text cultures in its fulness. Yet in them, the CRC's research is condensed in form. The theses bring together aspects and underlying principles of material text cultures that have proven pivotal over the past twelve years. Formulated as theses, these findings do not claim to be indisputable and universally valid, but rather invite us to wrestle with them, to think them through further, to supplement them, to differentiate them and, if necessary, to revise them at one point or another.

Chapter 1

Reflecting on Writing and Writteness

- Thesis 1** Writing cannot be reduced to its representational function, but has an aesthetic presence and effectiveness in and of itself. — 33
- Thesis 2** The materiality and presence of what is written produce their own semantic content. — 40
- Thesis 3** If what is written is not thought of in terms of communication between subjects, it itself takes on corporeality and agency. — 44
- Thesis 4** The dimensions of what is written are explicitly or implicitly reflected in pre-modern texts. — 48
- Thesis 5** The aesthetic permanence of what is written, i. e., its (long- or short-term) temporal permanence as perceived by the senses, is constitutive for the meaning and effect of writing. — 52
- Thesis 6** The spatial realisation is constitutive for the meaning and effect of what is written. — 56

Chapter 2

Layout, Design, Text-Image

- Thesis 7** Layout and writing supports are mutually dependent. In non-typographic writing cultures, the influence of the writing support is more diverse. — 69
- Thesis 8** The layout of what is written and the design of its characters always carry a potential for meaning. — 74
- Thesis 9** The layout of what is written can be significantly determined by the communicative intentions of the producers. — 83
- Thesis 10** Layout offers different reception practices. — 92
- Thesis 11** On multiple levels, layout and text type stand in a close connection that can be influenced from various sides. — 96

Chapter 3

Memory and Archive

- Thesis 12** Memory and archive are always dynamic and never concluded. — 120
- Thesis 13** Artefacts experience ‘memory biographies’ that can be modified during production and reception. — 125
- Thesis 14** The intentions of the ‘archons’ are manifested in the archives’ location and conditions of access. — 127
- Thesis 15** The material composition and organisation of archival records reveal information about their ‘archons’. — 132
- Thesis 16** In archives, inscribed artefacts are filtered, coded, and transformed. — 136
- Thesis 17** There is a direct correlation between the materiality of memory media, their target groups, and their chances of survival. — 140
- Thesis 18** Writing on memory media can shape memory and permanently bridge the gap between intention and reception. — 142

Chapter 4

Material Change

- Thesis 19** The materiality of text cultures changes not in leaps and bounds, but in processes of a continual nature. — 161
- Thesis 20** The affordance and function of inscribed artefacts, as well as practices of production and reception, change asynchronously along with processes of material change. — 165
- Thesis 21** Material change sparks ambivalent reactions. — 173
- Thesis 22** Taking recourse to traditional techniques of production leads to a re-evaluation of traditional materials, ways of production, and formats, as well as to changes in the attribution of meaning and practices of use. — 180
- Thesis 23** Changes in actors in the course of material change coincides with shifts in power relations and social contexts. — 184

Chapter 5

Sacralisation

Thesis 24 Writing has hierographic potential. — 205

Thesis 25 Writing opens up possibilities for the separation of profane and sacred space, thus creating spaces of liminality. — 214

Thesis 26 The status of sacrality is always endangered. The demonstrative use of writing serves to authenticate, legitimise, and stabilise sacrality. — 224

Thesis 27 Sacred places (temples, churches, altars) attract writing: inscribed artefacts partake there of the sacred, while simultaneously contributing to sacralisation themselves. — 231

Chapter 6

Political Rule and Administration

Thesis 28 Rulers and administrators of multilingual realms consciously chose which languages and writing systems were materialised in writing. Inscribing a text in multiple languages on a monument almost always served primarily to visualise authority. — 258

Thesis 29 Geographical or geopolitical space may contribute to the prestige and authority of a rulership text by associating the agent behind the text with the authority of the place. — 267

Thesis 30 A change in the materiality of a particular text often signals a shift in the function of the document. — 271

Thesis 31 Layout can considerably alter the significance of texts and allows for a distinction between rulership writing and administrative writing. From the layout, one can gauge the degree of sophistication and standardisation of an administration. — 278

Thesis 32 Simplified cursive handwriting, shorthands, or abbreviations are characteristic of basic forms of administrative writing. Rulership writing tends to use scripts that can convey care, durability, and faithfulness, which often leads to ‘monumental’ applications of script. — 280

- Thesis 33** Images can reinforce the message of rulership writing, visualise the ideological framework of societal order, and address larger, less literate audiences, but they are not always an integral part of rulership writing. — 283
- Thesis 34** Rulership or administrative texts, particularly those written on portable media, often required some means of material authentication in order to prove the validity of the artefact. — 286
- Thesis 35** Administrative writing included some of the most interactive forms of inscribed artefacts, whereas rulership communication was usually intended to be unidirectional. — 288

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