
Chapter 6

Political Rule and Administration

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To convey a message across a larger expanse of time and space than was possible via oral communication and thus to fix a fleeting thought or utterance of speech as materialised, external memory: these two functions are usually posited to be at the very origin of writing as a cultural technique.¹ Writing is believed to have begun either as messages to a supernatural, sacred power—which could also be construed as a pathway to worldly authority—or out of a need for managing an ever more complex economy involving the revenue from and redistribution of state (or temple) resources.²

Perhaps not incidentally, both these functions also form the very foundation of most political rule and administration. Political rule is inextricable from what we shall pragmatically term ‘states’, that is, composites of hierarchical social action and structure that exceed the confines of small groups whose members know each other personally (such as families or village populations). Such rule depends on messages being disseminated among all group members, and needs to legitimise itself and make this legitimisation persuasive and permanent.³ Administration, too, needs messages to be circulated and sent to specific group members so as to coordinate their actions across space and time.⁴ But even more so, it needs written records, which enumerate and list possessions and people, and archives or other forms of information repositories.⁵

1 For a critical discussion of these assumptions, see the comments in Chapter 1, Thesis 1.

2 Postgate/Wang/Wilkinson 1995. See also Martin 1988 (or its English translation: Cochrane 1994), who combines the competing theories mentioned above, but in a rather abstract way.

3 The qualification of the size and type of political rule seems necessary, as there were and still are certainly polities and societies or “communities that have no overarching structure of leadership and authority, no sovereign, no chief, no king, no permanent council to direct or coordinate their affairs” and have thus been called “acephalous (that is headless [...]) societies” (Goody 1986, 88). It is an open question whether, or to what extent, polities like these were dependent upon writing for upholding their leaderless collective action and how large they could become before succumbing to the kind of despotic rulership that previous generations of scholars have postulated as being inevitable.

4 While for the collective action model—that is, for his ‘acephalous societies’—Goody makes a point of assuring us that “[a]t this level literacy [and by extension: writing] played no part in the polity”, he is equally certain that “[t]he segregation of administrative activities in a specific organization, the bureaucracy, [...] is critically dependent [...] on the capacity for writing to communicate at a distance, to store information in files, and to tend to depersonalise interaction” (Goody 1986, 89–90).

5 Nissen/Damerow/Englund 2004.

* In alphabetical order.

These theoretical considerations highlight two spheres—namely, ‘rulership’/‘expression of authority’ and ‘administration’/‘information management’—in which writing as a state practice has developed and thrived since its incipient days. Of course, administration and information management are not limited to state practices, but are also at the core of economic enterprises such as business management. But here, for pragmatic reasons, we will focus predominantly on state actors. In any case, the two abovementioned spheres define the most basic functions of writing. Hence we shall term texts that display, establish, and legitimatise political rule as ‘rulership writing’ (or ‘Herrschaftsschrifttum’), while texts that solicit, provide, collect, summarise, archive, and retrieve relevant information (and thereby enable or support political rule) we shall call ‘administrative writing’ (‘Verwaltungsschrifttum’). More often than not, the basic binary characterisations of writings—‘public vs. restricted access’, claims for ‘truth vs. correctness’, ‘long-lasting vs. ephemeral or cyclical’—do conform rather neatly to the ‘rulership vs. administrative writing’ divide, although it bears stressing that these two categories are but hermeneutical devices rather than self-contained genres. There are certainly many transitions and overlaps between them.

Claiming political authority or justifying political rule of any kind requires *persuading* those who are ruled—as well as perhaps the ruling elite itself, other rulers, or the gods—of the legitimacy of that rule. Rather than simply *forcing* the ruled under the yoke by violent means, the legitimization of political rule entails a specific communicative situation with the following conditions.

The arguments for legitimation displayed in rulership writing usually constitute a unidirectional message by a sender (the rulers or their advocates) to a recipient (the ruled). While any claim to rulership can be challenged, it is not made with the intent that this should happen. Rulership writing is envisioned for the most part as a monologue, not a dialogue. Nevertheless, the message will need to be made public and accessible to as many recipients as possible. Like any argument, it has to make a truth claim. It cannot be based on doubt or a choice between equally valid alternatives. Even in a democracy, the suasion consists of the argument that certain political candidates (or incumbent politicians, for that matter) are best equipped to deal with a political situation and thus worthy of the political powers invested in them. Like any form of persuasion, rulership writings may operate on rational, irrational, or emotional levels, or even on all of these at once. Therefore, the medium may at times be more important than the actual message, the effect more valued than clarity. In this respect, the staging of a message becomes a crucial factor in strengthening its persuasive effect.

Finally, the argument usually contains, at least implicitly, the idea that the claimed rule is either permanently valid everywhere the message is conveyed or that it is at least valid for a specified period and in a well-defined territory. In other words, the claim may be indefinite (life- or dynasty-long and boundless; that is, worldwide or even cosmological) or limited and bounded, tied to certain conditions being met (for example, the mandate of Heaven, the graces of the gods).

None of this *has to* be formulated in written form. Charisma, which is so effective in suasion, is often better manifested in live performance, such as in speeches.⁶ But with the publicity and permanence of the message also being important factors, writing is often used as a powerful tool for achieving both. Thus, the writing materials of choice will tend to support the persuasion through their size, beauty, impressiveness, durability, visibility, placement, and so on.

Information management, on the other hand, relies a good deal on interaction and dialogue, on confidentiality rather than publicity, clarity instead of an appeal to emotions, accuracy rather than ‘truth’ claims, and actuality rather than permanence. Information can be obtained by observation, but without the cooperation of some of the ruled (or at least those who may be called ‘functionaries’) submitting written reports, a state cannot be governed. Although bureaucratic language is infamous for being obscure and ambiguous (which at times may be on purpose), rulers or their proxies do rely at a very general level on unambiguous reports so as to be well informed. They also need to clearly communicate downwards if they want the ruled to enact their wishes. While many orders need to be made public for the same reason, rulers or administrators always need to keep their informational edge over the ruled. If they cannot, they at least need to appear to know more and to retain the power to control access to sources of information, impose processes for gathering intelligence, or to decide which facts matter. It is clearly advantageous to rulers if the information they have is not only clear, but also accurate and comprehensive. It does not have to be ‘true’ in a moral or justifying sense, but making decisions on the basis of wrong information is not conducive to government. For the same reason, information for the ruler needs to be up to date. Information gathering does not aim at acquiring knowledge once and for all, but rather at regularly keeping such knowledge up to date and maintaining the steady flow of incoming messages. The goal is to build up an information repository that can be conveniently tapped at any time by those wielding power.

Again, not all administratively relevant information *has to* be committed to writing. For security reasons, some messages may only be relayed orally. But if and where writing is used to store and convey information as the basis for successful and efficient administration, it can make good use of the memory-keeping function of writing, resulting in the establishment of archives, access to which must be controlled.⁷

As in the case of authoritative rulership writing, the materials and practices chosen for administrative writing are expected to serve the specific purposes of information management, which are different from the purposes of claims to authority. The writing materials used in administration must be designed for fast production,

⁶ This does, of course, refer to personal charisma in the Weberian sense of charismatic rule (‘charismatische Herrschaft’); see Weber 2009 [1922], 221; see also his claim that even other types of rule based to a large extent on bureaucracy cannot, in fact, completely forego personal charisma on the part of leaders (ibid., 218).

⁷ See Chapter 3 ‘Memory and Archive’.

handling, and conveyance; they are usually available in adequate number, conveniently portable, and easy to produce, at least by the functionaries and those who are meant to use them (but not necessarily by anyone else). These writings also need to be archivable, which entails that they be easy to organise, store, retrieve, discard, and replace. Even though some information may be unchanging and permanent, as a rule of thumb good day-to-day administration relies on a lot of information that is more or less ephemeral, and which (literally) does not need to be ‘hewn in stone’. Information gathering in this context is usually a cyclical and repetitive affair. Unlike claims of authority generated by rulers, an administration may face the problem of too little or too much information, since its information is not entirely self-generated, but rather relies on opportune and external sources of information.

These communicative situations make certain types of materiality seem more adequate than others.⁸ However, once these material conventions are established, they become a code with which its users can play. Therefore, we sometimes see administrative writing staged as rulership writing, and when this happens, it is often accompanied by a shift in materiality. This is the case, for instance, when administrative lists are published in order to demonstrate a ruler’s magnanimity and may then be transferred from an ephemeral material such as wood, bamboo, papyrus, or paper to something more durable such as stone or metal. Likewise, size, layout, colour, embellishment, etc. are all parameters that in most cases will be employed differently in public claims of authority, be they blatant or subtle (in the case of rulership writing) as opposed to the hurried or meticulous yet efficient, matter-of-fact day-to-day information gathering and bookkeeping (as in administrative writing).

In some areas, the distinction between rulership and administrative writing is less clear. Legal texts, for instance—those pertaining to legislation and legal codification, and their promulgation and jurisdiction—tend to be of a dual or ambiguous nature. Jurisdiction exists to regulate and decide legal situations case by case so as to guarantee the smooth functioning of society, much like administration does; yet in the pre-modern era, juridical court decisions (not to mention the very act of legislating) were the prerogative of political powers and definitely also served to enhance their political authority. By their very nature, legal codes, such as royal or imperial edicts and decrees, must display authority. At the same time, they also serve the very practical ends of organising and directing the behaviour of the masses. Accordingly, they must be at once ‘awe-inspiring’ and understandable and clear. What is more, such legal texts pose a practical problem for any administration: they are constantly accruing and their sheer volume over time becomes a challenge for archiving and retrieval while also potentially leading to political ‘embarrassment’ when previous laws, oaths, treaties, or alliances become obsolete and must be concealed or surreptitiously deleted.

⁸ In addition to the communicative situation, the materiality of administrative and rulership writings also affects the actual territorial expanse that is to be governed or administered. On this point, see Innis 2007 [1950], 26–27, who distinguishes between the suitability of different media.

Moreover, in many non-typographical societies, there was an element that could blur the distinction made here between ‘rulership writing’ and ‘administrative writing’: namely, the oftentimes transcendent or cosmological justification of rule. Because of this, administrative writings—even more palpably than in modern times—came to represent political rule by their mere existence, and the presence of them reminded their users of the power relations of which they were part. Hence, anything that represented the rulers’ words, such as their name or depiction, was often embellished by means of precious materials, specific layouts, unusual or large sizes, as well as the use of colour, terminology and special protocols during the production and reception processes—even if the content of the writing served purely administrative purposes. Therefore, while this chapter will frequently refer to ‘rulership’ and ‘administrative writing’ as two basic categories, in order to better situate and classify concrete historical examples, this classification is less useful in other instances, for which other contextualisations must serve and support the hermeneutical purpose.

One such context is provided by the structure of the following narrative. This context is governed by the diachronic framework evidently provided by the process of producing inscribed artefacts and the different circumstances of that production. Within this framework, eight theses—often purposefully simplistic—are provided, which in turn are fine-tuned or contrasted with counter-examples.

The first section (Thesis 28) deals with the cultural contexts that make the objects and actions we analyse possible in the first place. These are language and writing systems, without which no official writing culture can be established. In particular, this includes issues such as multilingualism and translation. The second section (Thesis 29) analyses the spatial and performative context: namely, the importance of the location, setting, and staging of rulership and administrative writings, which includes public display and restricted access. The third section (Thesis 30) discusses the physical properties (the shape or form) and the dimensions of the inscribed artefacts, in addition to aspects of the production and standardisation of writing supports before any writing is applied to them. In short, we speak here about the choice of writing materials. Following the production process further, the subsequent three sections elaborate how writing supports received their writing, as well as possible illustrations and/or proof of authenticity, and how all of these elements were consciously deployed to achieve certain goals. In the fourth section (Thesis 31), we focus first on the layout of the writing on the support. The focus of the fifth section (Thesis 32) is the type of script, that is, the execution of the writing itself as cursive, standard, elaborate etc. The sixth section (Thesis 33) briefly turns to the use of imagery in rulership and administrative writings. The seventh section (Thesis 34) concludes the discussion of the production process by exploring means of authentication, with particular focus on seals and tally-notches. Finally, the eighth section (Thesis 35) will look at common types of reaction to and interaction with the finished inscribed artefacts on the part of the recipients of rulership and administrative writings.

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.

At the very outset of the discussion on material text cultures in the context of rulership and administration stands the observation that writing is not a precondition for ruling. Putting a language down in writing, a process one might term the ‘materialisation’ of language, is a choice. This choice becomes even more pertinent if the rule in question extended over people speaking different languages, or if the rulers and/or their administration attempted to address people outside their realms who might speak other languages (such as merchants). In multilingual polities, which can be observed from very early on in history and which were probably the norm rather than the exception, the question of which language(s) became materialised and which one(s) did not is of some significance for understanding the respective political and administrative culture.

To illustrate the potential of such an enquiry, we shall briefly touch upon the materialisation of language(s) in a small number of multilingual polities ranging from ancient Egypt to medieval England. We first provide a general outline of how rulers addressed the issue of multilingualism in their respective realms and whether there was a ranking amongst the languages, before tackling the question of the extent to which multilingualism was reflected in the writings of local administrators. Finally, we shall speak briefly about a specific phenomenon of rulership writing, namely the use of several languages on publicly displayed monuments.

Languages Materialised in Manuscripts: Choosing between Ideology and Pragmatism

One example of an empire that united several originally independent political and linguistic groups under its rule and fixed the language (and writing) of the dominant political group for the top level of administration is the Roman Empire, which used Latin in the west and Greek in the east. But basic administrative needs required that one also takes the divergent languages of local peoples into consideration. A remarkable case is the Old Persian Empire, which did not make Persian the administrative language, but rather Aramaic, as observed in documents from the far west (Egypt) to the far east (Bactria).⁹ This language and script was not specific to a politically domi-

⁹ For Egypt, see Porten/Yardeni 1986–1999; for Bactria, see Naveh/Shaked 2012. Overall, see Tavernier 2017.

nant group, but was comparatively easy to learn and had already played a role in the administration of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires before the Persian conquest.

Compared to the Roman or Persian Empire, the Kingdom of England in the eleventh century was a small realm. And yet, on the eve of the Norman Conquest in 1066, it was home to a number of languages: Old English, Norse, various Celtic languages, and even Norman French were spoken in the British Isles. Yet this multilingualism appears only partially in the documents issued by the Anglo-Saxon kings; these were written in Latin and Old English and thus materialised only those languages associated with royal authority.¹⁰

The use of a vernacular in official charters was exceptional in the English context and set Old English clearly apart from other contemporary spoken languages, almost marking it as the ‘official’ vernacular of the realm. This contrast can be seen in the activity of the Norman conquerors who were used to a different practice: their spoken language, French, was not materialised in the charters they drafted, but rather they were all written in Latin, the *lingua franca* of such documents in Europe at the time.

Upon his conquest of England, however, the new King William (r. 1066–1087) did not immediately introduce this Latin-based practice. At first, he continued to issue charters in Old English, employing personnel who had already served under the Anglo-Saxon King Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066). Remarkably, Old English was practically the only language used in royal writs and charters during the first years of William’s rule—only one writ in Latin has survived from before 1070.¹¹ The continuing use of Old English was first and foremost a political statement and not so much the result of practical considerations (for instance, existing administrative routines or comprehensibility of decisions on the part of the English populace). Even though William was eager to make forgotten the short-lived rule of his opponent at Hastings, Harold (r. 1066), he was keen to connect his own kingship with that of Harold’s predecessor Edward and position himself as the latter’s legitimate successor. The use of Old English may well have served to suggest a certain level of continuity between the reigns of Edward and William. Furthermore, it may also have been considered a signal to the Anglo-Saxons, especially members of the surviving elite, of William’s willingness to work together with them. However, when William ended his policy of cooperation with such native elites in 1070 and actively sought to replace them with Normans, the practice of writing royal documents exclusively in Old English came to an end.¹²

Yet Old English did not disappear altogether. A notable, if infrequent, feature of William’s documents issued after 1070 were bilingual writs, in which (save in one case)

¹⁰ Keynes 2013, 135–137.

¹¹ *Regesta regum Anglo-Normannorum*, 48. The writ (no. 35) was very probably issued before 1070. Another one dating from before 1069 is a Latin translation of an Old English writ, no. 32. On post-conquest vernacular documents in general, see Pelteret 1990.

¹² *Regesta regum Anglo-Normannorum*, 50.

the Latin text came first, followed by the Old English.¹³ In this particular case, the order of the languages made clear who were the conquerors and who were the conquered.

While Latin thus became the only materialised language of the ruling elite, it was not the only language associated with the new rulers, with the vernacular French spoken by the conquerors being at least as indicative and effective a marker of social difference. In contrast to the situation in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom and the Norman duchy, where the spoken language of the ruling elite was shared by the ruled, in post-conquest England the vernacular of the invaders was almost exclusively theirs, a language not shared with their subordinates. This also shows that the materialisation of a language as such—through its written form—did not automatically create an exclusive association between that language and the ruler(s). The written (materialised) word was not necessarily more important than the spoken word. Moreover, the recognition of the vernacular was not limited to French. Documents issued by the royal chancery explicitly addressed not only French speakers, but also English, Danish, Gaelic, Welsh, and Cornish speakers. The conquerors recognised the multilingual reality of their kingdom and their focus on a particular language (and in the rare instances of charters in Latin and Old English, on two) was not directed at denying the existence of other languages or even at suppressing them.¹⁴

Thus the choice of which language would actually be materialised depended on various factors. It is important to note that there were no universally applicable rules that determined the choice of the language(s). It cannot even be taken for granted that the language spoken by the ruler was the one to be materialised. Nor did the concern that the writing was to be understood by all recipients always dictate the choice. Which language rulers used for their writings was by and large an ideological choice in the widest possible sense of the word, which could be imposed by custom, concrete political aims or other reasons.

Likewise, it cannot be taken for granted that the writings of local governmental agents reflected the potentially multilingual background of the people with whom they were dealing. While there seems to be a certain correlation between the degree of literacy in society and the use of multilingual documents by local administrators (that is, the greater the literacy, the higher the likelihood of multilingual documents), there is no automatism based on this correlation. The extent to which local administrative documents were drafted multilingually remained a choice, which could be determined by pragmatic reasons as much as by ideological ones. Whether there existed a difference between administrative and rulership writing as concerns multilingualism must thus be studied in each individual case.

The conditions of lower-level administration often made it advantageous not to use multilingual texts, but rather only the locally used language and script (and, if

¹³ *Regesta regum Anglo-Normannorum*, 50–52.

¹⁴ Sharpe 2011.

necessary, translations from other tongues into the local language). The necessity of translating some forms of administrative writing can be documented by Demotic Egyptian letters from Achaemenid Egypt¹⁵ which either indicate explicitly that they have been translated from Aramaic or can be recognised as such from their unidiomatic use of Demotic Egyptian. There is also a Demotic Egyptian letter written in hieratic script from Roman-period Egypt which indicates that it has been translated from the Greek.¹⁶

In the Graeco-Roman world, administrative texts at the local level tended to be written in the language of the local administration, which was the same as that of at least one large part of the population; but again, as in medieval England, it may not have been the language of the central authority. Thus, decrees, letters, or other orders from high-ranking government representatives issued in Latin would routinely be translated into Greek in the eastern part of the Empire. An illustrative example is furnished by an ostrakon bearing a prefectural letter found at Mons Claudianus, the site of Roman imperial quarries in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, which were under the control and protection of the army.¹⁷ The text on the ostrakon is a Greek translation of the Latin original in which the prefect of Egypt ordered that his judgement on the case regarding two soldiers accused of abandoning their comrades in an attack by local barbarians be publicised in the military forts around the quarries. The involvement of the prefect of Egypt (who served as governor over the entire province) as opposed to a lower functionary was due to the severity of the offence. The governor spoke Latin, but he had his order circulate in Greek translation, since that was the language of the majority of the soldiers stationed there as well as of the local administration.

In some administrative documents, both Greek and Latin were used, but the texts written in each of them usually differed in content and function. For example, a text in one language could be a summary of the original in the other, such as we find with the birth certificate of a daughter born to the Roman soldier Longinus by his concubine in Philadelphia in the Fayum on 26 December 131 CE. The wax tablet in question first provides a Latin text mentioning among other things the military affiliation of Longinus, the names of his daughter and concubine, and the place and date of the girl's birth. This is followed by a summary in Greek, which encompasses a simple acknowledgement of birth and refers to details in the text above it—that is, to the Latin document.¹⁸

The different functions of the two languages are most conspicuous in Roman and late antique legal proceedings from Egypt. In these, the highly formalised header of the document would be in Latin, the description of the case in Greek, and the judge's ruling in Latin, which would sometimes itself be followed by a translation of the verdict in Greek. Evidently, the parties to such lawsuits were Greek-speaking, while the

¹⁵ That is, Egypt under Persian rule (526–404/401 BCE); see Quack 2021.

¹⁶ Quack 2020.

¹⁷ For an edition of the letter (O.Claud. inv. 7218), see Bülow-Jacobsen 2013.

¹⁸ Viereck/Zucker 1926, no. 1690. For the image, cf. the *Berliner Papyrusdatenbank* online at <https://berlpap.smb.museum/04001/> (accessed 28/9/2021).



Fig. 1: Letter from the Governor Qurra ibn Šarīk, 709 CE. P. Heid. inv. Arab. 12 recto. © Institut für Papyrologie, Universität Heidelberg.

legal ruling was pronounced in Latin and then made accessible to the Greek-speaking audience. For the same reason, the notarial authentication¹⁹ of Greek documents was often made in Latin.

An illustrative example of a multilingual document from medieval Egypt is a letter from the Arabic Governor Qurra ibn Šarīk dated to 709 CE (Fig. 1), which addresses the settlement of Aphrodito in Upper Egypt and demands that a local tax be paid. Presumably so as to make the document more understandable at the local level, the Arabic text in the first seven lines was translated below into Greek. Additionally, instead of

¹⁹ See Thesis 31 below.

the Islamic Hijri calendar date mentioned in the upper part, the lower Greek text uses the corresponding date according to the local pre-Islamic Alexandrian calendar.²⁰

In antiquity, the combination of texts of equivalent content in more than one language is rare in administrative documents. A notable exception is an edict aiming to curb abuse of the postal or transport system (*vehiculatio* or *cursus publicus*), issued by the governor of Galatia, Sextus Sotidius Strabo Libuscidianus after ca. 14 CE and inscribed on stone in Latin and Greek. Since the edict regulates in minute detail what travellers are entitled to and what the local population is obliged to provide them with, it functions as local administrative writing and aims to address not only the governing elite, but also the widest strata of the population. Both the choice of the inscriptional form for the document, which was also widely circulated on portable media, and the inclusion of the original Latin can be explained by the efforts at enforcing the regulations (hence the monumental form and positioning of the Latin text before the Greek) and by the necessity of expanding the text's audience. Since abuse was perpetrated mostly by travelling soldiers, many of whom were Latin speakers even in this eastern province, the promulgation of the Latin version helped to ensure that no one could plead ignorance of the governor's decree.²¹

The cases from Egypt and Rome show attempts at accommodating in what is written the reality of a multilingual audience to whom documents were addressed, yet they hardly reflect the entirety of languages spoken in these places. This points to the significance of the spoken word in executing administrative measures on the ground.

This can clearly be seen in post-conquest England in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. As far as we can trace the documents of local agents in this period, they do not differ from those issued by the king in terms of language; they were written in Latin.²² Nevertheless, the bulk of the practical administrative work on the ground was conducted orally, and if royal agents were unable to communicate with locals, they had to make use of interpreters. This shows firstly that local administration did not depend on the written word; governance by the spoken word continued to play an important role especially in multilingual polities. Secondly, the documents issued by the king and those by his agents or indeed other lords provided a very coherent picture in terms of their language. Indeed, this coherence may have been their major aim: to convey first and foremost the authority of rulers. This also means that the deployment of language did not reflect or communicate a dichotomy between the ruler on the one side and his agents on the other: when it came to communicating lordly authority, they used the same materialised language. In this respect, rulership and administrative writings were one, and as a consequence, the practical necessities of multilingual communication were left to the sphere of orality.

²⁰ SB I 5638; cf. Richter 2010.

²¹ Mitchell 1976.

²² The practice of latinising English words in writing points to the practical limits of multilingualism.

Multilingual and Multiscriptal Monuments and Manuscripts: Claims to Imperial Rule

Multilingualism was also well suited to bolstering the positive image of a ruler, be it as part of the display of military successes or the proclamation of prominent administrative measures. Although numerous examples inscribed in just one language exist,²³ the presence of several languages and scripts is not infrequent in this genre of texts.

In Ancient Egypt, rare occasions make it possible to compare royal inscriptions on quite different media. For the struggle of King Kamose (ca. 1550 BCE) against the Hyksos, who were of Asiatic descent and had occupied part of Egypt, there exist versions of the royal deeds written in hieroglyphs on stone stelae as well as in cursive ‘hieratic’ writing on a wooden board. The differences are limited to orthographic matters without any real difference on the linguistic level.

Multilingual decrees from Ptolemaic Egypt, including the one preserved on the famous Rosetta Stone, recorded the decisions of priestly synods that had an administrative impact, such as regulations on the celebration of feasts or the creation of new priestly groups. That such decisions were not only preserved, but also engraved monumentally on stone or metal — as was already prescribed at the end of the original text — shows that they also fulfilled the function of rulership writings. The languages and scripts used include not only Greek and Demotic Egyptian as the then-contemporary languages, but also hieroglyphs, which created a link to the millennia-old indigenous tradition of the country. This symbolically highly-loaded hieroglyphic version of the text comes first on the Rosetta Stone on the upper part of the stele, whereas Greek was placed at the bottom, even though it was the language of the ruling class at the time.

Examples of purely monumental rulership texts that do not contain practical decisions hail from the Achaemenid Empire. The large inscription of Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) at Bisitun (Behistun) — a long record of the deeds of the king, especially his fight against different rebels and ‘lying kings’ — was made in cuneiform script in Old Persian as the language of the political elite; in Elamite, the local administrative language; and in Babylonian, the language of neighbouring Mesopotamia (Fig. 2). Fragments of a version on a stele found in Babylon only give the Babylonian version; a papyrus found at Elephantine in Egypt presents a translation into Aramaic. The Canal Stele documenting the creation of a waterway between the Nile and the Red Sea gives an Old Persian and a hieroglyphic Egyptian version. A statue of Darius I, discovered in Susa but probably originally conceived for erection in Heliopolis in Egypt, also preserves hieroglyphic Egyptian, cuneiform Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian inscriptions. The inscriptions stress that the statue should serve as a witness to the Persian conquest of Egypt; that is probably the reason why the different cuneiform

²³ As in the case of the first Chinese empire, see Kern 2000.

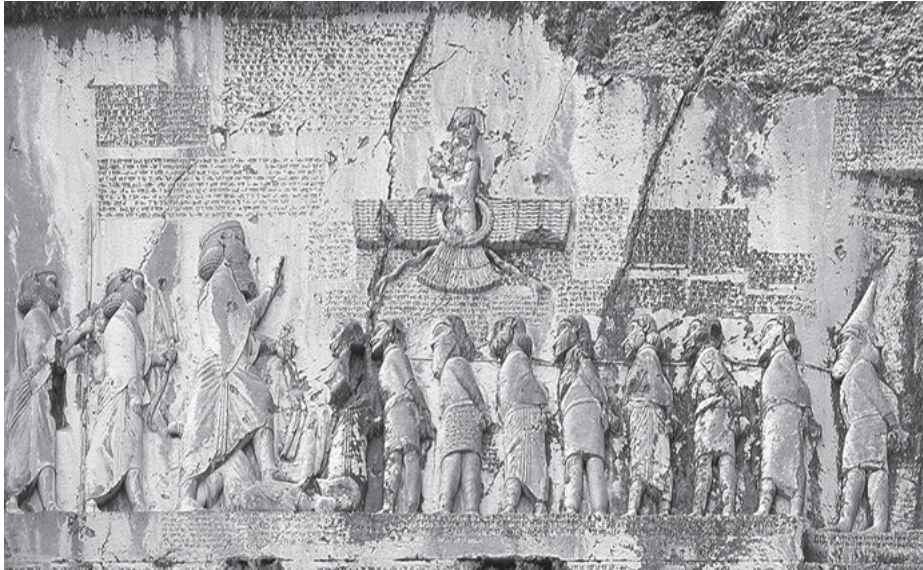


Fig. 2: Bisitun rock inscription in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, all in cuneiform script. Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Behistun_inscription_reliefs.jpg (accessed 28/9/2021).

versions are utilised in three different languages, more than would be needed for those actually interacting with it in its original context.²⁴ Note that monuments such as the Rosetta Stone or the Bisitun Inscription may be termed both ‘multilingual’ as well as ‘multiscriptal’, since over the course of millennia, both languages (such as Egyptian) as well as writing systems (such as cuneiform) changed so much that the concepts of a unitary ‘language’ and ‘writing system’ become blurred.

The multilingualism of the Bisitun inscription²⁵ finds later parallels in monumentally published accounts of royal achievements in the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the Mediterranean and other regions. The choice of languages can serve the pragmatic purpose of broadcasting the message to a wider population, but it can also be symbolic, since a language may carry a claim to political and cultural associations. Furthermore, although there is usually little difference in content among versions in different languages, a translation may display concerted efforts to accommodate the

²⁴ Schmitt 2009, 36–96. On the Canal Stele, see Mahlich 2020.

²⁵ Part of the inscription reads: “I am Darius the king, [...] the King of Kings, [...] the king of Persia [...] These are the countries that listen to me [...]: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, the Sealand, Sardis, Ionia, Media, Urartu, Cappadocia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Choresmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandhara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, and Maka, in total twenty-three countries. [...]” (translation by Van De Mieroop 2016, 328). Instead of ‘countries that listen to me’ the Babylonian version reads ‘countries that obey me’ while the Elamite text states ‘countries that call themselves mine’ (our translation from German provided by Borger/Hinz 1983–1985, 424).

concepts of the original message to its translated version and to the cultural expectations of the local audience.

Such intentions are apparent in the edicts of the Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire (mid-third-century BCE) in India, which comprised historical accounts along with a collection of the moral and religious precepts the emperor strove to implement. The edicts, composed in Prakrit, were promulgated and inscribed in various Indic scripts, as well as in Greek and Aramaic translations. The Greek version shows considerable effort to align the original to the Hellenistic cultural background of the Greek colonists in Alexandria in Arachosia (modern Kandahar).²⁶

The most famous accounts of Roman imperial achievements, the *Res gestae divi Augusti* ('Deeds of the Divine Augustus'),²⁷ originally composed in Latin ca. 14 CE, survive in three inscriptional publications from the distant province of Galatia, where they were inscribed either in both Latin and Greek, or in only one of the languages, with the choice apparently depending on the composition of the local population. Remarkably, the Greek version employs at least four Greek words to render different shades of meaning of the Latin word *imperium*, attesting to the particular effort put into translating concepts of special significance.²⁸

The tradition of multilingual records of deeds was continued by the rulers of kingdoms at the borders of the Roman Empire. Thus, the *Res gestae divi Saporis* ('Deeds of the Divine Shapur', before 272 CE)—a trilingual inscription set up during the reign of the Sasanian King Shapur I northwest of Persepolis, in today's Fars Province of Iran—comprised versions of the text in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek.²⁹ The translation of the text, which extolled the king's victories against the Romans, into Greek may have been both pragmatic (by addressing a wider audience) as well as symbolic (by linking into the tradition of Roman *res gestae* literature).

If the materialised languages used different sign systems, it was particularly easy to distinguish the languages even from afar. While the contexts in which such monuments can be found greatly varied, a common message links them all, sometimes more prominently than on other occasions: namely, the ruler's claim to imperial rule (in this context meaning the rule over several distinct polities). Yet multilingualism was only one aspect of monumental writing. It is therefore necessary to turn our attention to the topology of writing and to look closer at how and where rulership writings could be staged and displayed.

²⁶ I. Estremo Oriente, nos. 290–292.

²⁷ Cf. Chapter 2, p. 99.

²⁸ For a recently updated edition, see *Res gestae divi Augusti* (ed. by John Scheid). See also Cooley 2012 and the next section.

²⁹ Huyse 1999.

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.

The efficiency of the inscribed message, its authority and its audience, could be affected by non-textual parameters, among which the textual topology is of particular significance. Topology might endow a rulership text with power, regardless of whether or not the authority behind the message is explicitly named in the text, since the inscribed text may exploit the authority of the location of the monument or object on which it is inscribed. In the case of administrative texts, authority could be affected by such factors as access to and use of the texts or circumstances surrounding their deposition. Moreover, a change of setting could lead to a change in function, from that of administrative to rulership writing.

Location: Geographical or geopolitical space—whether at the ‘centre of the world’ (for example, Delphi in Greece) or at the heart of the empire in Rome—contributed to the prestige and authority of the inscribed message. The text of the abovementioned *Res gestae divi Augusti* details how the emperor placed “the whole world” under the sovereignty of the Roman people. Promulgated probably in papyrus copies across the Roman Empire and inscribed on various monuments in its provinces, the text opens with a declaration that the account is a copy of the text engraved on bronze pillars in Rome.³⁰ This very statement endows the message displayed in a remote province with the authority of the original’s location in the centre of the empire, while making manifest the subordination of the place where the inscription stands to the power of Rome.

In non-typographical societies, the spreading of information entailed access to and control over an assembly of people. Whereas in the modern age information comes to people—be it in the form of a newspaper or television or any other kind of mass media—in non-typographical societies, people had to go to the source of the information, whether it was in the form of an oral announcement or a publicly displayed text. A place frequented by people, such as one of particular religious or civic significance, would be a fitting location not only for the most efficient spreading of the message, and would also enhance the prestige of any text displayed or proclaimed there. Since the publication of a text in such a location would be restricted to a governing body, the displayed message encompassed the authority of that body and functioned thereby as rulership writing, no matter whether the ruler was an emperor or a body of citizens. Thus, the ten taxiarchs, high-ranking military leaders in classical Athens, posted conscription lists inscribed on whitened boards in the Agora, presum-

³⁰ *Res gestae divi Augusti* 1.

ably the most frequented place in the city, as a manifestation of their authority over the conscription process for upcoming military expeditions.³¹

It is probably due to public accessibility and the function of the location where a message is displayed that there is a tendency across various cultures to display rulership texts in places of religious significance. The combination of affording public attention with the placement of the message under the protection of the divine comes into play. For example, the display of many archaic and classical Greek interstate treaties on bronze tablets affixed to the walls of the sanctuary of Zeus in Olympia or the practice of inscribing laws on the walls of the major temple of a polis emphasise the interplay of rulership and religion.³²

The importance of the location in which administrative texts are deposited is well illustrated by the frequent storage of civic documents in Greek sanctuaries. The purpose of this is usually the preservation of the documents and possibly also the limitation or at least the regulation of access to them, which aims to prevent tampering with the documents and thus to ensure their validity. The official administrative records of the city of Athens were kept in the Metroon, which was not only a sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods but also the state archive.³³ Also, citations of administrative texts, be they in public inscriptions or in copies from law texts, frequently referred to the archival deposition of the base texts, buttressing the notion that the texts were valid and authentic.³⁴

Setting: The interplay of a monumentally inscribed text and its setting is well illustrated several centuries later by the charters of Emperor Henry V (r. 1099–1125), which he had inscribed on the façade of the cathedral of Speyer in August 1111 on the occasion of the burial of his father, Emperor Henry IV (r. 1056–1106).³⁵ Speyer cathedral, which had been the spiritual centre and the burial place of Henry V's forebears, the Salian emperors, was the embodiment in stone of the Salians' self-perception as the vicars of Christ on earth. Yet, the charters Henry V had engraved on the façade of the cathedral did not confer further privileges on the church, but rather granted liberties to the citizens of Speyer.

Henry's choice of the façade was not simply rooted in the fact that the cathedral was the most prominent building in Speyer; the choice in and of itself was also a statement. First, by appropriating the cathedral's façade, Henry V made clear who was in charge; he ruled not only over the state, but over the church as well. Second, he used the cathedral to manifest a change of policy towards the church, because the liberties

³¹ Cf. Andrewes 1981; Lougovaya 2013.

³² Hölkeskamp 1992; Christ 2001. For an updated list of published inscribed bronze tablets from Olympia, see Siewert 2018.

³³ Wycherley 1957, 150–160; Sickinger 1999, esp. 114–138.

³⁴ For Chinese legal texts, see Loewe 1965.

³⁵ Most recently discussed by Scholz 2011a–c.

Henry granted the citizens limited the rights of the bishop. While there is no doubt that Speyer retained some importance for Henry as an imperial bishopric and as the family's burial place, it is also clear that the bishop and his cathedral were no longer cornerstones of Henry's kingship which they had been under his forebears. Henry instead turned to other sources, especially to the citizens of the flourishing towns, which were to reshape the political, social and economic landscape for centuries to come. To put all this on the cathedral's wall in golden letters was as drastic a message as could be imagined.

While the meaning and authority of inscribed texts might be informed by their setting, the process is reciprocal, because inscriptions can mark and thus create meaningful context. This can be seen in inscriptions associated with sanctuaries, which display texts announcing the special status of their grounds.³⁶ For example, four stelae inscribed with copies of a royal decree granting the right of asylum and inviolability to the sanctuaries of Isis and Penephros in Theadelphia in the Fayum were set up in order to mark literally the territory covered by such rights.³⁷ Personal conduct or the performance of rituals within the sanctuary could also be regulated by means of inscriptions, which range from the frequently attested requirements of purity on the part of those entering the sanctuary³⁸ to the mysterious prohibition on boiling falcon heads in the newly excavated Falcon Shrine in the town of Berenike.³⁹ These inscriptions literally proclaim rulership over the spaces they delineate by displaying the rules that apply within them.

Staging: The promulgation of commands necessarily implies the usage of portable media or oral communication. In societies that did not make use of writing or refrained from using it in certain types of communications, such as that described in the Homeric epics, a set of codified rituals could accompany the delivery of a rulership message, for example, the use of a scepter by a herald charged with delivering the message. With the advance of writing, a royal letter becomes one of the most common ways of exercising power. The staging of such transmission of power may sometimes endow the message with more power than the issuer himself or the content of the message could have effected, as is illustrated both in Herodotus and in medieval German romances, to give only two examples.

In the story of the fall of Oroetes, a satrap of Lydia appointed by Cyrus the Great, the protagonist outlives both Cyrus and his successor, Cambyses, indulging in his growing power for the sake of which he does not shun turning against the Persian nobles who dared to cross him. When Darius becomes king, he is wary of the power

³⁶ See also Chapter 5, Thesis 25.

³⁷ Two copies of the former (I.Fay. II 112 and II 113, dated 19/2/93) and three of the latter (I.Fay. II 116–118, dated 22/10/57) survive.

³⁸ Cf. for example, Petrovic/Petrovic 2018.

³⁹ Oller Guzmán et al. 2022.

and atrocities of Oroetes, yet wishes to avoid direct confrontation with the satrap, whose guard comprises a thousand spearmen. Bagaeus, a Persian noble, comes up with a plan: he goes to Sardis, the seat of Oroetes, with many letters bearing Darius's seal. There, he hands them one after the other to the royal scribes to read out, all while watching their reaction. Seeing that they have great respect for the rolls and what is written on them, he proceeds to give the scribes a letter demanding that the guards abandon Oroetes. As the command is read out, the guards lay down their spears. When Bagaeus hands over the final letter, in which King Darius charges the Persians to kill Oroetes, the spearmen immediately do so. The message of the king, through the cunning staging of its delivery, achieves what the king, in person, might not have been able to achieve.⁴⁰

Letters were also a common way of communication between authorities later on in the Middle Ages. The thirteenth-century chivalric romance *Willehalm von Orlens* by Rudolf von Ems describes letters exchanged between King Witekin of Denmark and King Amilot of Norway and shows that not only writing itself, but also its staging, could function as a demonstration of power. The visual-haptic presence of King Witekin's letter is narrated in detail, with the letter being richly decorated with a golden seal.⁴¹ Even though political letters in this specific cultural context were usually sealed—in contrast to private communication by letters—this particular material of the seal needs to be highlighted, since the seal itself not only serves as a mechanism of authentication and a protection, but the fact that it is made of gold also demonstrates Witekin's wealth and power.⁴² It is effective even before the letter is read. Furthermore, in presenting the letter, the messenger executes a performative function. He stages King Witekin's rulership and foresight, all the more so by handing out two more letters that are sealed in the same way. Witekin does not wait for Amilot's answer; instead, he presents documents of both King Girat of Estonia and King Gutschart of Livonia, who in turn guarantee their support of the Danish king against his Norwegian counterpart. The material presence of these two letters overshadows their content, which is only briefly summarised.⁴³ Ultimately, the materiality of the letters and their successive presentations, especially with the use of the same golden seal for all three letters, are shown to be more important than the content of the message they contain.

Finally, it bears mentioning that it is not only the delivery of the rulers' commands that may be staged. By contrast, for the effect of memorials or petitions to the ruler, it can be even more critical how their submission is staged because the status of their sender or the circumstances of regular delivery do not always imbue such missives with the kind of importance or urgency that the sender may regard as essential or desirable. In these cases, a certain amount of theatrics are in order. In the early Chinese empires,

⁴⁰ Herodotus, *Historiae* 3.127. Cf. Briant 2002, 344–345.

⁴¹ Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, line 10 549.

⁴² For more on seals, see the section on authentication below.

⁴³ Rudolf von Ems, *Willehalm von Orlens*, lines 10 652–10 653.

for instance, memorials by high-ranking officials were usually handed in and read out aloud to the emperor and the assembled ministers in the large audience hall to which only the privileged had access. The only chance for the common folk to have their petitions heard by the emperor, however, was to try and elbow their way to a particular streetside palace gate in order to hand in their petitions to a palace official. Sometimes, though, if a high-ranking official wanted to draw particular attention to his memorial, he would also choose this self-deprecating way of handing in a petition instead and creating the scandal necessary for garnering for himself the desired attention.⁴⁴

Thesis 30

A change in the materiality of a particular text often signals a shift in the function of the document.

This section looks at the production, physical properties, size or dimension, and form or shape of inscribed artefacts, all while seeking to address the following questions: what motivated rulers, administrators, or other producers of inscribed artefacts operating within a state to choose specific types of writing support? Why were particular types of stelae or other monumental or non-monumental artefacts chosen for official purposes? How did their choice influence the reception of the inscribed artefact in the communicative process?

Material Properties and Conditions: The physical (and chemical) properties of any writing material are experienced as hardness, colour, mass, density, structure, and durability in terms of the raw materials used, which could include naturally occurring stone, clay, bone, wood, bark, bamboo, hide, etc., or processed materials such as metal, textiles (esp. silk), papyrus, parchment, or paper. Moreover, factors such as abundance and accessibility can also affect how the material is perceived.

Mass, hardness, abundance, or accessibility, in addition to production conditions, set limits for the size afforded by a specific writing material. A rare substance such as gold cannot be made into monumental stelae (although it can be used to gild such stelae). The dimensions of cloth depend on the size of the loom used in weaving; those of traditionally produced paper, on the dimensions of the screen used.

Size as well as shape and weight also determine the potential mobility of an inscribed artefact. The size of some naturally shaped materials—for example, bovine shoulder blades, elephant tusks, turtle shells, or palm leaves—does of course limit the size of the inscribed artefact produced from them. But even the internal biological or physical structure of a raw material may influence the possible sizes and shapes of the artefact to be made from it. The vertical growth and fibrous structure of fast-growing

⁴⁴ Giele 2006, 109–111.

bamboo, for example—possibly the first writing material in China—may have affected the design of narrow, oblong writing slips as well as their vertical orientation, and thus predisposed the writing of Chinese script to the vertical direction, a situation that survived nearly into the present as the predominant direction of writing for the language.⁴⁵

There is also the economic side to writing materials. An artefact's production cost and its prestige are determined not only by the rarity or abundance of its basic material substance, but also by the skill and labour required to transform it into a suitable writing surface and then to inscribe a message on it. That inscriptions on bronze, for example, required engravers or casters who possessed specialised skills and tools was a major reason for the limited supply and exceptional prestige of inscribed bronze vessels. Equally important is the fact that bronze could only be produced with access to tin. It is therefore no coincidence that, in many societies, a list of names inscribed in bronze or gold is perceived as being more significant than one made on inexpensive materials (for example, papyrus or ceramic sherds), even when both inscribed artefacts carry an identical text.

Ascribed Values: Beyond the physical properties, natural occurrence, and economic value, material substances usually have culturally or individually ascribed values. Types of stone such as granite, marble or limestone are examples of substances of choice for monumental inscriptions, which are then rather immobile. Marble in particular is a medium that was found by the Greeks and Romans to be very suitable for carving inscriptions because of its relative malleability, durability, and availability in many places (though not in Egypt, where marble was rare). It is also regarded by many as being beautiful, and certain varieties deemed exceptionally valuable (esp. Parian marble or, in the Roman imperial period, marble from Proconessus) could be chosen to enhance the prestige invested in the inscribed message.⁴⁶

Gold's prestige as a 'royal' material par excellence in the west (but less so in China, where jade was highly valued instead) can be attributed not only to its rarity, but especially to its near absolute resistance to chemical changes. In practice, characters engraved in or applied to stone could be gilded or formed with metal: gold foil could be affixed to small tiles (*tesserae*) and used in the formation of words in mosaics, and in monumental texts bronze lettering often imitates gold. In short, these materials and colours were (and are) typically more highly regarded than other options such as limestone (stationary) and ceramic sherds (portable).

Other examples of materials and colours associated with a ruler's authority are purple, green, and—to a lesser extent—vermilion, again due to the rarity of the substance (Tyrian purple or the mineral cinnabar, respectively) or to the conspicuousness or similarity of the colour itself to (precious) blood. Transmitted sources record that the decrees of the Han emperors were to be sealed with purple clay and packed in

⁴⁵ See also Chapter 2, Thesis 7.

⁴⁶ On the ideological aspects of the use of marble, cf. Maischberger 1997; Paton/Schneider 1999.

green bags.⁴⁷ In the Byzantine Empire as well as in medieval Europe, purple parchment inscribed with gold or silver letters was sometimes used for biblical codices or charters, such as the purple marriage charter of Otto II (r. 973–983) for his wife Theophanu.⁴⁸ However, while purple is decidedly a dye for imperial clothes in the Roman and Byzantine tradition, it seems not as common a colour or substance for writing. Neither was vermilion cinnabar, or in general bright red, necessarily exclusively associated with political rulership in Rome or Byzantium. The most prominent example of this connection being made are the ‘vermilion endorsements’ added by the emperor himself in Qing Chinese documents.⁴⁹ In Egypt as well as medieval Europe, on the other hand, red ink simply served to highlight (‘rubricate’) lettering, without connoting any association of text or inscription to royal authority.⁵⁰

Shape and Size: Shapes and sizes, too, tend to be influenced by cultural values, even when other forms and dimensions than the ones encountered would be possible to produce. The connection between form and textual content could sometimes be so close that a mere glance at the form sufficed to recognise the authority conveyed by an artefact. Consider the Qin-Han (221 BCE–220 CE) edicts: despite being written on everyday (and less permanent) materials such as wood or bamboo, the size of their writing supports was larger than that used for other types of administrative writing.⁵¹ Transmitted sources also indicate that during the Han period, legal codes were to be written on bamboo or wooden strips approximately 55.5 cm long, which was much longer than what was used for day-to-day administrative documents.⁵² When the Han emperor sent a diplomatic note to his counterpart, the khan of the Huns or Xiongnu, the khan used wooden strips for writing that were two centimetres longer than those of the Chinese emperor, thus clearly making a political statement expressed not in words per se, but rather in the material conveying such words.⁵³

This was also the case with the military diplomata issued across the Roman Empire to non-citizen veterans. These usually take the form of diptych-like bronze rectangular tablets, hinged together and sealed with wax. On both of the inner sides is inscribed the

⁴⁷ Green was another colour closely associated with the Han emperor, as it symbolised the notion of birth. Such a symbolic meaning continued in the early medieval period, where it was reported that the imperial decrees of Western Jin (266–316 CE) emperors were written on green paper; see Tomiya 2010, 22–28.

⁴⁸ Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv, Wolfenbüttel, 6 Urk. II.

⁴⁹ Wilkinson 2012, 280.

⁵⁰ For red ink being used in ancient Egypt, see Posener 1951.

⁵¹ Additionally, appellations such as ‘Your/His Majesty’ or the clause ‘The imperial decision says: approved’ were usually highlighted to stress rulers’ authority: cf. Giele 2006, 100–101; Tomiya 2010, 31–38; Staack 2018, 275, n. 101.

⁵² Tomiya 2010, 44–45.

⁵³ Sima Qian et al., *Shiji* 110, 2899; for an English translation, see Sima Qian et al., *The Grand Scribe’s Records*, vol. IX, 274.

extract (twice, usually in different hands) of the *ad personam* imperial decree granting Roman citizenship to the veteran and legal status to his wife; on one of the outer sides is inscribed once again the extract; the other outer side has the names of the witnesses with a seal. This unique arrangement of the texts on the mass-produced artefact evokes both the administrative authenticity and the authority given to the artefacts.⁵⁴

There are also many culturally specific names and terms for the different formats of writing materials, too many in fact to recount here. However, what seems to act almost globally as a unifying force is the principle of affordance. Viewed from the side of the recipient or handler, the dimensions of writing materials have certainly also been shaped by the size and functionality of the human body. When the Sumerians picked up a lump of clay from the ground to form a writing tablet, they made sure that it fit snugly into their hands, which determined both the tablet's size and shape. Furthermore, it cannot be a coincidence that in many cultures, the dimensions and shapes of sheet-like writing supports (such as is used in state administration and other types of everyday writing) are similar to the distance formed by two hands casually extended outwards, that is, about shoulder-width or a bit shorter (20–40 cm) for some purposes. Another factor is that the length of a line of written text that the human eye is usually able to capture at close reading distance during one saccade (that is, in a single glance or period of fixation) is shorter than twenty centimetres.⁵⁵ These biological conditions of the human species may have determined the usual length of a line of writing.⁵⁶ Thus, it is not surprising to find standard writing materials of similar dimensions around the world, especially in the area of day-to-day administrative writing, while enlarging these dimensions—a phenomenon also seemingly encountered across the world—could betray a ruler's intention to impress.

Writing Material in the Context of Political Rule and Administration: Rulership writing seeks to display, establish, and legitimise political rule, and is often publicly displayed to this end. It also needs to be long-lasting, at least until the next ruler produces writings to support his or her own claim to power. All this would imply that writing materials for rulership writing should be not only durable and capable of monumentality (so as to be publicly visible), but also perhaps impressive, awe-inspiring, and beautiful, so that the message might be supported by the appeal of the medium and become all the more persuasive.

This is why rulership writing is frequently found inscribed on prestigious surfaces—often immobile and monumental (such as a cliff, rock or wall)—but also on small, mobile precious artefacts. By contrast, administrative writing, which occurred

⁵⁴ For a short introduction to this type of document, see Speidel 2015, 338, and Eck 2003; see also the discussion in Thesis 31 below.

⁵⁵ Naturally, this biological fact also applies differently to different writing systems (alphabetical or logographical) and different writing directions (vertical or horizontal); see Behr/Führer 2005, 32–33.

⁵⁶ See also Chapter 2 'Layout, Design, Text-Image'.

ubiquitously and in much larger volumes than rulership writing, could not have been too expensive and should have been easy to handle and standardise with respect to size and shape. After all, in a large polity, many government personnel—not all of whom were highly trained—had to handle such documents. The materials for administrative writing in general, therefore, has to be flexible, portable, easy to transport, and suitable for a variety of applications, including effective archiving. Though stone-like durability is certainly not required, since administrative information in general tends to be ephemeral, such materials cannot be too fragile or volatile so as to withstand the conditions of transportation and archiving.

Finally, writing materials may also be chosen with a view to preventing fabrication and forgery. In non-typographical societies, exceptional functionality, high production costs, and premium-quality materials—seen, for example, in gold coins bearing the portrait of a potentate—defined or increased the efficacy of inscribed artefacts bearing rulership writing, since the message partook of the aura of its material and had the potential to evoke awe in those beholding it. On the other hand, everyday inscribed artefacts made of humble and/or inexpensive materials but which participated in political or economic administrative processes—such as ceramic jars onto which an inscription specifying their contents and volume had been applied—represent administrative writings, not only because of their mundane function, but also on account of their materiality.

If there is a shift in the materiality whereby the inscribed artefact acquired enhanced exclusivity, this suggests that regardless of the textual content, authority was intended to be displayed. If the materials became more ordinary, this testifies to a more prosaic, pragmatic administrative function.⁵⁷ One such example of a shift in function through material change and monumentalisation are the inscribed building accounts from the Acropolis in Athens, which were carved on a marble stele in 408/407 BCE.⁵⁸ To inscribe the Athenian building accounts in stone for public display, in addition to writing them down with ink and stowing them away in the relative seclusion of an archive, was an expression of authority, a sign of the grandeur of the building enterprise and a symbol of political accountability.

It is noteworthy that monumentalisation did not always enhance the authority of the ruler alone. In many cultures (though far from all), the political authority invested by a potentate in any document which granted rights or privileges also encouraged the ruled to make copies of the document by using even more prestigious materials, glorifying both themselves and the ruler. Examples include Eastern Han stelae inscribed with the text of official letters pertinent to the regulations instituted by the central government or agreements made between a local government and a private individual or

⁵⁷ See also Chapter 3, Thesis 17.

⁵⁸ IG I³, 1 476, dated 408/407 BCE; text and translation: <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGI3/476> (accessed 27/9/2021); image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EPMA_6667-IG_I\(3\)476-Erechtheion_accounts-1.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EPMA_6667-IG_I(3)476-Erechtheion_accounts-1.JPG) (accessed 27/9/2021).

a community.⁵⁹ One should additionally note that users of this type of administrative ‘letter monuments’ also usually endeavoured to recreate the layout and other material traits of the original letters despite the change in material. This is exemplified by two stelae datable to 153 and 159 CE respectively from Shandong and Henan provinces.⁶⁰

The dynamics between the two factors of ‘function’ and ‘materiality’ sometimes make it difficult to determine if an inscribed artefact conveys authority because of the specific material(s) used to produce it, or if the authority of a ruler as the ultimate or ostensible origin of a written message encourages a writer to choose a prestigious material for the task. At any rate, the authority (or lack of authority) of what is written on such artefacts is embodied in their materiality. Therefore, setting materiality and its concomitant practices (which may also translate into production or transaction costs) as a decisive criterion helps us to discern more clearly the spectrum between the poles of rulership writing and administrative writing. This would be difficult to do if the criteria were only textual content or intent, as these aspects are not readily quantifiable, whereas material and transactional costs are.

A good example for the applicability of the materiality criterion is the genre of travel permits or visas, in which we observe an astonishing range of practices and documents, even within a single culture. In China under the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE), long-distance travel was strictly limited and commoners were required to apply for permits for their journeys through checkpoints along the way. Usually, applicants had to submit information such as personal characteristics, criminal records, type of vehicle used, belongings, travel companions, and so on to the authorities, who would verify the submitted data and, if approved, issue the requisite permits or visas. Such travel documents were written on wooden or bamboo writing supports not particularly large in size and inscribed in non-decorative clerical script. Thus they were by no means extraordinary with regard to their material characteristics.

By observing the materiality and associated practices of these travel documents more closely, however, we can make out quantifiable grades. A first parameter that is readily quantifiable (and visible) is any change in size. Moreover, even a run-of-the-mill small travel permit could increase in material- and transaction-based prestige if it acquired a seal from an issuing authority; this prestige would be even greater in the case of a multi-piece tally. Furthermore, in case the authority’s parts of the tallies were to be transported to the checkpoint in special bags or containers, or delivered by special courier, the sovereign’s authority and/or the urgency of the affair would again have been heightened to a certain degree. Finally, the realm of rulership writing is once again encountered with a set of travel and tax-exempt trade permits or tallies, such as

⁵⁹ One specimen dated to 153 CE documents an imperial edict approving the creation of an additional junior official exclusively serving in the Temple of Confucius in Qufu, Shandong, as well as the subsequent correspondence between the central and provincial governments with regard to the selection of a suitable candidate for this new position; see Hou 2014.

⁶⁰ For images, see *Kandai sekkoku shūsei*, nos. 70 and 80; cf. also Chapter 2, Thesis 11.



Fig. 3: Two of five travel permits by Qi, Lord of E, cast in bronze in the shape of bamboo segments with gold-inlay writing, dated to 323 BCE, Hubei Province, China. Photo from the catalogue of the bronzes kept at the Museum of Anhui Province. © Anhui Museum.

those for merchants issued by Qi, the sovereign of the regional state of E, dated to the year 323 BCE, which form a set of five oversized pieces, cast in bronze in the shape of bamboo tube segments and inlaid with ornate golden characters (Fig. 3).⁶¹

⁶¹ For discussions of commoners' requirements for passport applications in the Western Han period, see Sou 2018, 229–230, and Takatori 2020. For the bronze permits from the regional state of E, see Falkenhausen 2005.

Having discussed the various materials, their affordances, and how they can be shaped to serve as rulership and administrative writings, we now narrow our focus to look at layout, script, the use of iconography, and means of authentication.

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.

Once a writing support has been selected and created, writing as well as (potentially) images can be inscribed on or applied to it. The choice of layout is important as it defines the relationship between different parts of the writing or writing and images.⁶² As with the writing itself and potential images, the neatness and complexity of the layout is an indicator of how much care has been invested in the drafting process. At the outset, the properties of the material provide a framework for the layout: the size of a sheepskin or the shape and condition of a rock, for instance. Within that framework, regularity, neatness, and complexity can be used not only to estimate the degree of sophistication and standardisation of an administration, but also to identify different production steps and consequently a certain procedural hierarchy within an administration. Drafts are by nature less carefully executed than final versions.⁶³

Layout can serve to direct the reader's attention and to clarify content. For example, tax lists, financial accounts, and similar texts tend towards a tabulated layout; items are written out at the start, while the corresponding numbers or amounts are positioned (with some space before them) in a margin or at the bottom in order to facilitate the final calculations. Depending on the context of an inscribed artefact, the layout can differ even when the texts themselves deal with similar or identical matters. When, for example, we look at land registers from Graeco-Roman Egypt, differences between manuscript and monumental writing are obvious. Manuscript versions of land registers contain brief entries, which are summarised to a minimum and employ a well-tabulated layout. By contrast, a hieroglyphic monumental inscription in the temple of Edfu listing all land owned by the temple makes use of very elaborate signs, but the numerical indications are difficult to spot due to the *scriptio continua*.⁶⁴ In this case, the two kinds of inscribed artefacts differ in almost all aspects of their materiality, signalling a clear distinction of administrative from rulership writing.

⁶² On this thesis, see also Chapter 2 'Layout, Design, Text-Image'.

⁶³ Holz 2022.

⁶⁴ Quack 2015.

If the similarities between inscribed artefacts are much greater, differences in layout can indicate differences in meaning or significance. This is demonstrated by examples from the chancery of the counts palatine of the Rhine. The counts palatine, who were among the top-ranked princes in the Holy Roman Empire, began keeping written records of their seignorial privileges, prerogatives, and rights, as well as of their outgoing charters from the fourteenth century onwards. The earliest register of outgoing charters was begun in 1355,⁶⁵ with the earliest cartulary (that is, a register of incoming charters) being commissioned in 1356.⁶⁶ The almost contemporaneous register and cartulary dealt with the same content (charters), and yet their materiality makes it very evident that they are very different documents. The layout of the register is a very basic listing of copies of outgoing documents on pages from top to bottom within more or less regular margins. The manuscript is written in a cursive script, but lacks any table of contents, illuminations, or rubrics. The register thus conveys the impression of a very pragmatic, business-like document, written at speed for potential internal use only.⁶⁷ By contrast, the layout of the first cartulary shows carefully aligned copies of charters in a double column. The script is a Gothic book hand, and while illuminations are also lacking here, each entry is headed by a rubric. A table of contents is also present, facilitating orientation. In comparison with the register, the book hand and neatly arranged double column layout of the cartulary convey a much higher level of execution. Moreover, the script and layout echo the style of contemporary liturgical manuscripts, particularly those of the Bible. While it would be a step too far to attribute any liturgical character to the cartulary, the design clearly sets it apart from the register, which shows all the marks of everyday chancery work.

Thus, in relation to both administrative and rulership writing, layout provides several layers of interpretation. As a general rule of thumb, there is a correlation between the standardisation of the layout and the cleanliness of its execution on the one hand, and the professionalisation of the administration on the other hand. The validity of this observation can also be extended to working processes within an administration. The cleaner the copy, the more it approaches the final version. But there is more to layout than clean lines and an experienced hand: irrespective of the professionalisation of the writing process, the choice of the layout for texts of similar content could alter their significance quite considerably, leading to a clear distinction between texts of a more purely administrative nature and those pertaining to rulership writing. The means to communicate between the lines and in the margins, however, must be analysed on a case-by-case basis.

These observations suggest a strong relationship between layout and script at all stages: in the writing, reading, and understanding of the inscribed artefact. Therefore, we should now turn to the writing itself.

⁶⁵ Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, 67/804.

⁶⁶ Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe, 67/799.

⁶⁷ Cf. Spiegel 1996, vol. 1, 108–114.

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.

When processing administrative acts, speed in noting them down is of the essence. Therefore, the pressure towards faster, more economical, and more fluid forms of writing results in the development of abbreviated or simplified character shapes optimised for flowing lines. Such a running and/or simplified script is usually called ‘cursive’.

Given these considerations, the form of a script appears at first to provide a relatively straightforward means of distinguishing between administrative and rulership writing. Indeed, there are many cases where such a distinction can easily be drawn, an extreme example of which is provided by Egyptian script. The immediately pictorial system of hieroglyphs remained in use as a compulsory medium for monumental inscriptions for more than three millennia, but alongside this script developed a form of cursive writing, leading eventually to the so-called hieratic script. Once this had become standardised, there was a phase of relative stability concerning long-term archiving of texts of a literary or religious nature. However, with the exception of a few specific time periods and applications, hieratic was not used in monumental display. This administrative and everyday script was more open to change and development than the complicated system of hieroglyphs, and in the early first millennium BCE, there was an innovative drive for the development of an even quicker, more cursive form: namely, the so-called Demotic script. This script is characterised not only by the significantly simpler character forms, but also (and especially) by the frequent use of abbreviations for words pertaining to administration, such as terms for grain, farm animals, or types of money. There is always a balancing act between the trend towards (time-saving) shorthand and the desire for (justiciable) clarity. The optimisation value achieved depended to a large extent on what was written and who was addressed by it. Terse notes that only the writer had to be able to read (and which were often only of ephemeral relevance) constitute the lowest requirement of refinement. Letters that were read by the sender and recipient, but not necessarily by more people, could also place lower demands on objective clarity, especially if the people in question were familiar with the individual writing habits of each other due to previous contact. Documents intended for permanent archiving such as religious and literary texts, which in the future could also be potentially read by people without prior familiarity with the writer’s hand, required a higher degree of clarity.

But we would be greatly mistaken to generalise this and to say categorically that cursive script is reserved for administrative writing, whereas non-cursive script indi-

cates rulership writing. Especially in the worlds of Chinese and Arabic writing, particularly cursive or ‘fluid’ calligraphy has attained high prestige as a skill and art form, thus becoming both monumentalised (transferred onto stone stelae as calligraphic models) and being used to represent rulership.

The case of Chinese or Arab cursive calligraphy epitomising high cultural and social standards and thus even being used by rulers themselves again suggests a clear dichotomy between representational rulership writing and more mundane administrative writing, which also valued cursive script but in which calligraphy as an art form played less of a role. However, the matter is even more complicated. Across times and ruling cultures, cursive scripts could be used in a very ‘fluid’ way across the divide between administrative and rulership writing. The Romans, for example, had firm ideas about which type of script was adequate for which function and on what type of writing support. For instance, inscribed imperial decrees and laws on tablets and/or marbles were usually in well-carved, square ‘monumental’ script, while administrative texts written in the private sphere—for instance, everyday contracts issued by a competent authority—were usually executed in cursive script.⁶⁸

For administrative writing in the Roman empire, the balancing act between time-saving records and recognisable unambiguity can also be found in the usage of Latin cursive scripts. The rapid sophistication of the administrative system in the Roman Empire called for quick communication media in written form, which in turn required scripts marked by both speed and clarity. At the edge of the Empire, scribes in Londinium and Vindolanda used a cursive script (Old Roman Cursive) to write military documents, letters, and accounts. Words that appear very frequently, including monetary denominations and the names of military ranks, were abbreviated or expressed with symbols used throughout the Empire.⁶⁹ Scribes could write more efficiently and with little concern for misunderstanding by using cursive script and employing symbols and shorthand in administrative documents, since the writing system in question was considerably standardised and widely understood across the geographic area under Roman rule.

Interestingly, the dichotomy between cursive and monumental scripts frequently became blurred as their perceived functionality or the neatness of their execution varied considerably. An imperial decree from 368 CE ordered that the local chanceries not imitate the type of letters used in the imperial chancery,⁷⁰ revealing that there were

68 It must be noted, though, that the function of the inscribed artefact also played a role. In principle, an edict could be transcribed in cursive or in monumental script, depending on the function of the written copy. For the distinction between cursive hands and ‘epigraphic hand’, namely block hands with more epigraphic elements, see Mugridge 2010.

69 For the palaeographic features of the Vindolanda tablets, see the introduction by Alan K. Bowman and John D. Thomas in *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets*, 47–63; for Old Roman Cursive and its development in general, see Tjäder 1979 and recently Mullen/Bowman 2021.

70 CTh 9.19.3.

different levels of hierarchy within cursive scripts at the time. On rare occasions, we can observe cursive script in inscriptions, such as in late antique imperial decrees that probably reproduced the writing of their text exactly as it appeared on the manuscript master copies.⁷¹ On most notarised copies of Roman military diplomata, the script was square-shaped and well-carved—though not as neat as on the Lyon Tablet—in order to imbue the copies symbolically with the power of the issuing authority, namely the emperors.⁷² Even many private inscriptions, such as epitaphs and private votive artefacts, are inscribed in squared letters, though less neatly than in imperial inscriptions. Broadly speaking, the material choices, locations, and intended functions of what was written all influenced scripts, which we can situate on a spectrum ranging between the two poles of cursive scripts and non-cursive, monumental ones.

The futility to consider cursive script as being a marker purely of administrative writing in contrast to rulership writing across various writing cultures is neatly exemplified by fourteenth-century charters from the governments in England and the Holy Roman Empire. These do not make use of a script distinct from other documents of the same administrations, but rather seem to be instances of rulership writing clothed in the ‘business-as-usual’ garb of administrative writing. It is true that the writing of these royal or imperial charters demonstrates a particularly careful and neat execution and thus could distinguish itself from charters issued by other less carefully working chanceries.⁷³ Nonetheless, the writing of royal charters was not itself distinguished in terms of a completely different style, as was the case for instance between the Gothic book hand and cursive script. While the charters of Emperor Louis IV (r. 1314–1347) followed the general tendency towards a more cursive script,⁷⁴ the English royal charters portrayed the general characteristics of all documents issued by the chancery.⁷⁵ In the latter case, the ‘royal hand’, if at all, may have been a distinguishing factor common to all documents issued by the royal chancery, but such a claim would have to be tested against detailed studies of writings issued by secular and ecclesiastical lords.⁷⁶

While it can be argued that non-cursive, monumental scripts—with the exception of the special cases of artful calligraphy in East Asia and the Arabic-writing world—were more closely tied to rulership writings than to administrative writings,

71 For an exemplary case, a stele inscribed with an imperial decree, see Feissel 2000. The decree was later compiled into *Codex Theodosianus* (CTh 1.16.8).

72 See Eck 2003.

73 Cf. the difference in quality between the writing of the charters of the counts palatine and those of the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, Spiegel 1996, vol. 1, 22.

74 Bansa 1968, 107–227; cf. Wrede 1980, 19.

75 Danbury 2018, 270.

76 Oftentimes, there are also methodological difficulties: the attempt to prove the existence of a certain script style that is particular to a centre of power is hampered in many disciplines (including papyrology and Early China Studies) by the fact that the vast majority of manuscript sources hail from peripheral regions and comparatively low-ranking personnel, so that originals written at the political centre by the elite simply do not survive.

an exclusive connection cannot generally be claimed here, even for Europe. Depending on the individual writing cultures, cursive scripts could also be used to represent the ruler and his or her authority.

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.

The subject of the relationship between text and image is too large to be dealt with here adequately.⁷⁷ The evidence is manifold, ranging from doodles scribbled down by (bored) scribes in administrative documents to elaborate images in rulership writings, and even on seals and money.

As a medium highly controlled by the state, and moreover one produced in large quantities, coins have great potential to convey rulership messages to a large audience across the area of their use through written legends or images, which includes original designs but also countermarks.⁷⁸ While in the Sinosphere, coins normally bore their denominations and beginning in medieval times, also the era name in writing,⁷⁹ coins west of the Pamir Mountains served as ‘monuments in miniature’ and thus were covered with images of deities, civic symbols, rulers, or religious calligraphy together with legends, all selected by the issuing authorities to address audiences ranging from the rulers (as a kind of panegyric) to the end-users of coins (as a kind of premodern propaganda).⁸⁰

The vast volume of coin production and the wide distribution of currency brought the symbols on them to areas speaking different languages far away from ruling centres. The Aramaic-speaking Jesus knew the emperor’s portrait and inscription on the denarius when facing the Pharisees,⁸¹ and Emperor Julian (r. 361–363 CE) became angry when people in Antioch mocked his beard and the pagan symbols on his coinage.⁸² The coins of early Greek city states had very sparse legends, if at all, but were immediately recognisable and also explicitly addressed by the image they showed (often-times a ‘heraldic’ animal, such as an owl, a turtle, or horse)—a clear sign of identity

⁷⁷ See also the section ‘Writing and Image’ in Chapter 2, pp. 77–78.

⁷⁸ See Fig. 5 below for an example of countermarks on the coinage of Emperor Nero.

⁷⁹ For old Chinese coins, see Thierry 2017.

⁸⁰ Elkins 2019 offers a great overview on imagery on Roman coinage; he was the first to coin the term ‘monuments in miniature’ (Elkins 2015).

⁸¹ Cf. *The Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, Matt 22:15–22.

⁸² Cf. Emperor Julian, *Misopogon* (‘Beard-Hater’) 355d.

creation. After Alexander the Great (r. 336–323 BCE) had conquered the Achaemenid Empire, coinage in that area began to show local potentates from very diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, imitating Alexander's own coins with his image (posture and paraphernalia)—a clear sign of identity imitation and political aspirations. The imagery of early Roman round coins, on the other hand, due to the Republican nature of their state, did not depict a potentate, but rather other symbols of Rome, such as a quadriga and a god or goddess—also a clear expression of political identity, when compared to the cases above.⁸³ These historical facts alone show that imagery on coins irrespective of any written language was consciously chosen and carried a message, which in these cases would also have been intelligible to the vast majority of illiterate people as well as the semi-literate with a limited, functional literacy allowing them to recognise and differentiate between set phrases or words on inscribed artefacts such as coins. In everyday use, however, multiple factors played a role in the efficacy of the political communication attempted via images on coinage.⁸⁴

It is interesting to note that one of the earliest (non-monumental) expressions of a ruler's authority and glory consists more of image than of text. This is the famous Nar-Meher Palette, which displays an elaborate iconography celebrating the victorious pharaoh, with only a minimal amount of hieroglyphs scattered in between, which even at first glance seem to be merely part of the illustration. Incidentally, these have been recognised as some of the earliest phonetic writing in the world, dating to before 3000 BCE. In Egyptian royal decrees, one can see that the oldest monumentalised implementations remain purely textual (and also very faithfully imitate the complex layout of such documents on papyrus), but from the second millennium BCE onwards, we increasingly find an image added on top of the stele; mostly showing the king before one or several deities.⁸⁵

On other instances of rulership writing, images offer the opportunity to visualise more abstract concepts of rulership and societal organisation. For example, above the text of the laws, the stele bearing the Code of Hammurabi depicts the ruler standing before the sun god, who was also the guardian of justice.⁸⁶ While this image reinforces the message inscribed on the stele, it first and foremost conveys the message that the ruler is the one to make and to enforce laws by divine providence.

⁸³ A brief overview of all these cases with superior reproductions is found in Eagleton/Williams 1997, 30–43.

⁸⁴ Noreña 2011 and Woytek 2018 discuss the agencies of imagery communication from the perspectives of issuers and users, respectively. Moreover, Picard 2010 and Callataj 2016 have described how Romans in the second century BCE paid their mercenaries in the Eastern Mediterranean mostly in various coinage bearing Hellenistic civic images in the widely recognised Attic weight standard, only introducing Roman symbols in the first century BCE as mercenaries in the Hellenistic period began to prefer coinage with higher silver content. On the interaction of users with coins, see Thesis 35 below.

⁸⁵ Quack 2012.

⁸⁶ Van De Mieroop 2016, 121.



Fig. 4: Louis IV's charter for Otto I and Barnim III of Pomerania-Stettin in 1338. Greifswald, Landesarchiv, Repositur 2, no. 73. © Landesarchiv Greifswald.

If we turn again to the fourteenth-century charters of the Holy Roman Emperor, Louis IV, we also occasionally find illuminations in these. A well-studied case is the charter issued in 1338 to the Pomeranian dukes Otto I (r. 1295–1344) and Barnim III (r. 1320/1344–1368), by which Louis enfeoffed them and granted them the rank of imperial prince (Fig. 4). The initial 'L' of the charter is transformed into an image representing the scene of the investiture: the emperor is seated on his throne, while Otto and Barnim kneel in front of him and hold the lance with the banner representing their new status granted by the emperor.

Just as in the case of the Code of Hammurabi, the image not only reinforces the text of the charter, but also conveys the much more general message that it is the emperor who grants the dignity of an imperial prince; the princes' authority derives from that of the emperor, who is at the helm of the Empire's social and political order. On another level, the image also communicates that from now on, Otto and Barnim were part of the elite group of imperial princes. The drawing therefore communicated—in addition to its primary message of a hierarchical relationship between the emperor and the imperial princes—a message of affiliation.⁸⁷

Yet, if we look more closely at Louis' charters, we find that the majority of them contain no illuminations. The same can be said for the charters of his successor, Emperor Charles IV (r. 1346/7–1378). This was by no means exceptional; the contempo-

⁸⁷ Peltzer 2019, 22–23, with further references.

aneous English royal chancery under Edward III (r. 1327–1377) presents a similar situation. The practice of illuminating the initial of a royal charter was well known, but as in the Holy Roman Empire, this was not deployed as a regular means of royal propaganda in the English realm.⁸⁸ This points to a very important fact: even if rulers and their administrations knew about the power of images and disposed of the means to employ them on their inscribed artefacts, they could opt against using images on a regular and systematic basis. The explanation for this is a healthy reminder that the propagation of the royal image was not necessarily a priority for royal government. In England, as in the Holy Roman Empire, the recipients paid for the charters, and this payment also extended to the execution of any drawings or images to be included.⁸⁹ The decision, therefore, whether to illuminate an initial lay with the recipient and not with the royal chancery. In other words, the administrative routine behind the production of the charters outweighed the possibilities of trumpeting the royal cause. As a consequence, the parchment and letters of a charter did not serve as a platform for a systematically developed and displayed royal iconography. In connection—literally—with charters, this was left to the seal, the charter's principle means of authentication.

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.

Once an inscribed artefact had been produced, it would often undergo a final step by which the artefact was validated so as to prove the legitimacy of its contents. Such verification processes were ubiquitous across societies, serving political, legal, and economic functions and ranging from notes or initials to signatures and seals; these all could be quite small, plain, and straightforward, or else large, ostentatious, and elaborate to emphasise a ruler's power. The focus of this section is on two examples commonly used in the context of administrative and rulership writing and which are particularly interesting from a material perspective: the seal and the tally.

Validation via seals has a long history stretching back to the ancient world. As such, different disciplines utilise the term 'seal' differently, referring either to the object making an impression (such as stamp seals) or to the imprint created using such a device (the seal impression or sealing).⁹⁰ Stamp seals are already attested in the

⁸⁸ Peltzer 2019, 37, with further references.

⁸⁹ Peltzer 2019, 38, with further references; Danbury 2018; for the charters of Louis IV, see Bansa 1968, 274–280; Wrede 1980, 13.

⁹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the development and use of seals, see Giele/Oschema/Panagiotopoulos 2015.

Chalcolithic Near East (fifth and fourth millennia BCE),⁹¹ remaining common in Egypt as well as in India long thereafter and still in use to the present day in the Sinosphere. Mesopotamia by contrast largely used cylinder seals.⁹²

Whereas for this earlier period, seals were the object that made the impression, in medieval Europe, the seal was understood to be the end product, the impression made into or onto a malleable material by a seal matrix or die. The medieval European seal would be appended to a written document by a cord of parchment or thread, or else affixed to the body of the charter itself (*en placard*), combining both text and image, which represented the ruler and his claims to rulership. In order to receive the imagery and text impressed upon them, seals had to be made of a reasonably soft material. Most medieval seals were made of beeswax,⁹³ but could also be made of more precious or durable materials, such as lead and gold.⁹⁴ The use of these two metals, however, was rare and often reserved for the most solemn or important documents, a famous example of which being the Golden Bull of Charles IV from 1356, which regulated the election of the Holy Roman Emperor. Like the writing of the charter, its sealing was also paid by the recipient.⁹⁵ Therefore, the choice of a material more durable or prestigious compared to wax would be used to display such prestige. Of the seven copies of the Golden Bull of 1356, only one was sealed with wax,⁹⁶ with the remaining copies being sealed with gold to demonstrate the high status of the recipients, namely, the imperial electors. Nevertheless, for the majority of medieval charters, a wax seal appears to have been sufficient for the needs of most.

The government of early Chinese empires also utilised seals to authenticate administrative writings. Inscribed artefacts unearthed from the northwestern frontier regions reveal that administrative manuscripts were always sealed close by their senders, even when their contents were supposed to be displayed publicly. This indicates that the practice of applying a seal or seals was not only meant to safeguard a message but also to authenticate it with an official's authority.⁹⁷

Another means of material authentication, particularly of administrative artefacts, may not necessarily involve any text. In early Chinese empires, wooden tallies would be carved with notches to denote the number of items exchanged in a transaction (including, but not limited to, transactions between the government and non-officials).⁹⁸ The tally would then be split into two or three parts as necessary and distrib-

⁹¹ Keel-Leu 1991.

⁹² Collon 1987; Keel-Leu/Teissier 2004.

⁹³ The malleability of beeswax is evident in its use as a coating for wooden boards to provide a reusable writing surface: Clanchy 2013, 120.

⁹⁴ For sealing materials in medieval Europe, see Stieldorf 2004, 60.

⁹⁵ See the earlier discussion of recipients paying for the writing of charters at the end of Thesis 33, p.286.

⁹⁶ Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, Reichsstadt Nürnberg Urkunden 938.

⁹⁷ Tomiya 2010, 80.

⁹⁸ For wood as a writing material, see Berkes et al. 2015.

uted to the involved parties.⁹⁹ At the audit, these transaction tallies would be used to check the amount recorded in official accounts, and in the case of any discrepancies, other parties might be asked to submit their tallies to authenticate the number.¹⁰⁰ A similar practice occurred in medieval England, where wooden tally sticks with notches representing cash sums were used as receipts to indicate how much sheriffs had paid at the royal exchequer, with the stick split lengthwise to provide both the sheriff and the exchequer with an identical copy of the tally as proof of payment.¹⁰¹ These examples convey how materiality (notches) delimited, augmented, or possibly even contradicted the interpretation of the text of an inscribed artefact (tally).

Thesis 35

Administrative writing included some of the most interactive forms of inscribed artefacts, whereas rulership communication was usually intended to be unidirectional.

While the previous sections mainly illustrate the factors of materialisation of administrative and rulership writing based on their respective material contexts, this section focuses on what happened *after* these writings were committed to stone, wood, paper, or parchment. While rulers intended to impose their wills unidirectionally on the subjects through instances of rulership writing, different audiences could still react to and interact with the inscribed artefacts.

The following discusses the material reaction to and interaction with inscribed artefacts of the state. By ‘reaction’, we mean the copying and reproduction of texts on the one hand or replies to communication on different artefacts (which may be made of the same or different material[s]) on the other hand, as well as metatextual reflections about those artefacts. By ‘interaction’, we understand the editing, addition, emendation, erasure of, as well as reply to, text on the same artefact. Although literacy is an important aspect of these issues, it is too large a topic to be comprehensively dealt with here.

Interactive Administrative Artefacts: Administrative communication flows in multiple directions or even cyclically, and is almost conversational in nature, as information is relayed between and within governments and the governed. The artefacts produced within this system of information gathering and retrieval are often more interactive

⁹⁹ For the use of notches and the production of wooden tallies during the Qin and Han periods, see Momiyama 2015; Ma 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Lai/Tong 2016.

¹⁰¹ Stone 1975.

in nature, a result of being the work and product of many people and sources. On the one hand, in order to rule effectively, rulers needed to be informed both about the situation on the ground and about how their will was being implemented; on the other hand, subjects could also petition or appeal to rulers in order to benefit from their authority. Either way, the communication between parties involved in administrative procedures often left material traces in the writing they produced, from which we can determine how their texts were received as well as how responses to these texts were generated.

Many administrative records exhibit this exchange or dialogue of information gathering on the artefacts themselves. Specific types of documents could be created, much like a fill-in form, whereby one individual would complete the framework of information that the document was to contain, while another person, who had retrieved the requisite information, would then complete the document by filling in the blanks. In medieval England, these fill-in style forms were used to draft manorial and other financial accounts as part of the audit process, whereby a lord's officials would be held accountable for all income and expenditures associated with their respective office. Often, clerks would draw up the bulk of the account but leave key information, such as specific figures or totals, blank.¹⁰² The auditor could then complete these gaps as he checked and approved the sums, without affecting the layout or legibility of the records that would be archived for future reference.¹⁰³ Conversely, if an account had been written in full on submission to the audit, the auditors could substantially edit the document, deleting erroneous figures or excising claims for expenditures that had not been authorised by the lord. In both types of accounting documents—the fill-in form style and fully completed one—medieval manorial records demonstrate and display the administrative conversation of the audit, whereby an official proffered his version of events and the lord (through his auditor) responded, approving or rejecting the official's claims.

Interaction undertaken for approval or rejection could also take the form of simple notes, as the more powerful party could exert its authority with just a few words on the same artefact. In one particular Roman administrative procedure, a high official responded to a petition on the same papyrus originally submitted to him. On a veteran's petition in Greek to the prefect of Egypt dated between 222 and 255 CE,¹⁰⁴ there is a subscription approving the petition, also in Greek, at the bottom of the papyrus sheet in a hand different from that of the main text, as well as the remark *recognovi* ("I certify") in Latin.¹⁰⁵ Such *subscriptions* can even remain when the text had been copied onto other materials. On a stele inscribed with administrative serial correspon-

¹⁰² Harvey 1976, 42.

¹⁰³ For the storing and archiving of inscribed artefacts, see Chapter 3, 'Memory and Archive'.

¹⁰⁴ Sängér 2011, no. 10. A link to an image of this papyrus is available online at *Papyri.info*, see: <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.vet.aelii;10> (accessed 30/9/2021).

¹⁰⁵ Discussed in Haensch 1994 and Thomas 2003.

dence from late antique Didyma,¹⁰⁶ we also find the remark *edantur* (“they should be published”) in Latin, decorated with ivy-leaves.

Reacting to and Interacting with Rulership Artefacts: In contrast to administrative records, rulership artefacts (that is, inscribed artefacts fulfilling the function of rulership writing, including commemorative stelae, coins, certain kinds of manuscript communications emanating from the government, etc.) were intended to be unidirectional: that is, part of a top-down process, with the message of the rulers imposed upon their subjects through the written word. Despite this intention—and because it was often widely promulgated and displayed in public—rulership writing would easily provoke interactions and reactions both from its contemporaries as well as from later generations. Of course, much of this remained relegated to the realm of uttered comments or gestures that have left no permanent trace; but some reactions were manifested materially. Written artefacts could be enhanced or monumentalised, or damaged or altered in a way that we can still observe today.

One of the possible strategies of reacting to rulership writing was through monumentalisation. While monumental inscribed artefacts displaying political rule could have been destroyed along with the demise of the political authorities that created them, many of these have ended up outlasting the rule and rulers that commissioned them. A number of factors can account for this phenomenon. For instance, later rulers might leverage the rulership writing of earlier rulers to bolster their own legitimacy. Likewise, such inscribed monuments can become symbols for the collective memories of different social groups.¹⁰⁷ Although these groups were simply supposed to receive such rulership writing, their subsequent use of monumentality served as a technique allowing them to exceed the inscribed artefacts’ designated function of expressing political authority. Through that technique they also honoured and commemorated themselves locally. Given that many inscribed monuments were created by local communities rather than a central government, such multifunctionality was intended from the monuments’ inception.

The abovementioned Chinese stele from 153 CE with an edict granting privileges to the descendants of Master Kong (Confucius) is a good example of such multifunctionality.¹⁰⁸ This stele was carefully preserved by the Kong lineage in Qufu long after the collapse of the Eastern Han authorities. This move was likely motivated by the fact that the monumentalised imperial edict and the magistrate’s instruction became proof of the sagacity of their ancestor, Confucius, and the prominence and privilege of his lineage. This stele, therefore, was made as much for the ruler as for its users. Aside from the more universal framework of imperial largesse to which the stele also refers, the memories and identities that it helped to evoke or construe were more localised,

¹⁰⁶ For further details, see below p. 291.

¹⁰⁷ Assmann 1988, 90–91. Cf. Allgaier et al. 2019.

¹⁰⁸ See above p. 276.

specified, and layered. Presumably, artefacts bearing an identical rulership text can even evoke different local memories in cases in which they have been created by different social groups. In this respect, the monumentalisation of a rulership text gave its users a certain amount of leeway so as to leverage the monument's authority. This sets what is written here apart from the immediate political agenda that the text's original authors might have had in mind.

The Eastern Han phenomenon just mentioned mirrors the situation in the Roman Empire, especially during its later phase. Many late Roman documentary inscriptions faithfully reproduced features that were originally found on other materials (presumably bearing the original text) in order to retain the message's credibility. This sometimes led to the inconsistent use of scripts or the emergence of multilingual texts. Under the reign of Justinian I (r. 527–565 CE), a tripartite dossier of correspondence related to the exemption from civic tribute was inscribed on a tall stele in Didyma. From the text on the stele, three consecutive acts can be reconstructed reflecting a specific administrative process: an imperial edict; a hearing before the praetorian prefect of the East on the next day; and a declaration of the provincial governor of Caria, to which Didyma belonged. Of special interest here is the hearing, of which the stele text offers an extract. It reproduces not only what the prefect said in Greek, but also interpolates this with the Latin text of the edict itself, which must have been originally written on papyrus.¹⁰⁹ In reaction to the reception of these texts, the local decision makers chose to reproduce the full dossier on stone rather than only the imperial edict. This reinforces the notion of administrative procedure as a source of authority.

In contrast to the direct and immediate interactions between government personnel in official accounts and correspondences (that is, administrative writing), interaction with rulership writing was often indirect and sometimes even took place in a context different from that of the original writing. Often a reaction to artefacts bearing rulership writing or images reflects a personal response of a viewer or recipient and addresses the public or other viewers, not necessarily the ruler or government as the sender of the message. The original message of rulership writing could be appended, distorted, or ridiculed in order to demonstrate the response of a later ruler or the ruled. As a result of these actions, the materiality of the original rulership writing might be altered or destroyed. Much like the modern defacing of political posters or slogans that abound nowadays during popular elections, graffiti and targeted acts of damage—as well as non-targeted instances of vandalism—were usual forms of such destructive interactions in pre-modern times as well.¹¹⁰

Alternatively, destruction could also happen by command. In the premodern world, memory sanctions (often referred to anachronistically as *damnatio memoriae*)

¹⁰⁹ For an edition of this source, see Feissel 2004, 304–306. For a discussion of the extract, see Manservigi/Mezzetti 2016, 210–234.

¹¹⁰ A practice long in the focus of the CRC 933; see for instance Mauntel et al. 2015 and Kühne-Wespi/Oschem/Quack 2019.



Fig. 5: Bronze *as* of Nero, with the obverse portrait being countermarked with *SPQR* on the neck.
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at the local and empire-wide level purportedly aimed at the total erasure of an individual's material existence in writing and imagery, most commonly of an emperor considered wicked or harmful to the world. However, for a variety of reasons this erasure was never implemented completely across an empire. The practice existed in the early Roman Empire and continued into early Christianity, when the names of pagan deities and anti-Christian emperors were sometimes erased.¹¹¹ But the local communities usually carried out memory sanctions against such disgraced emperors in a way that might have preserved the authority of the written monuments. In late antique Aphrodisias, a predominantly Christian city, for instance, the locals erased only the *cognomen* of the disgraced anti-Christian Emperor Julian, and later inscribed the name of the new Emperor Theodosius onto the erased surface, but Julian's titles and even his first two names remained intact.¹¹²

The continuation of legal authority combined with dissociation from the original context of rulership through defacing can also be seen in imperial Roman bronze coinage, the value of which depended not only on its metallic content, but to a large degree on the financial and political credentials of the issuing authority. After an emperor was condemned, coins issued under his authority often received countermarks showing the recognition of new authorities. Following the reign of Nero, the Roman Senate frequently applied countermarks with the legend *SPQR* (an abbreviation of the phrase *Senatus populusque Romanus*, 'the Senate and People of Rome') on the neck of Nero's portrait on the obverse of his bronze coins (Fig. 5); the new Emperors Galba and Vespasian also used countermarks with their own names on Nero's face. The interaction

¹¹¹ For memory sanctions and the role of locals, see Omissi 2016 (Roman), Schwedler 2021 (early Christianity).

¹¹² IAPH2007 8.405.

of original coin design and later countermarks therefore imbues such coins with new political authority while recognising the economic value of an existing artefact bearing rulership imagery and carrying out economic functions.¹¹³

Moreover, there were also certain forms of rulership artefacts that expected or elicited a response on the same artefact. Appended texts or addenda were one of the common ways of materialising responses to rulership writing. In China in 210 BCE, the Second Emperor of Qin (r. 210–207 BCE) added his own edict next to the inscriptions that his father, the First Emperor, had left ubiquitously on stelae, measures and weights. This additional edict foregrounded the First Emperor's achievements and was complementary to existing rulership writing.¹¹⁴ By highlighting his relationship with his revered predecessor, the young and inexperienced Second Emperor in turn enhanced his own authority.

Metatextual Interaction: Another way of interacting with rulership writing was through various genres of metatext, such as critique, commentary, and fiction. Often, such responses differed diametrically from the original messages of specific instances of rulership writing, or could have little to do with the forms and contents of the actual inscribed artefacts they mentioned. The metatextual interaction with rulership writing, therefore, reveals how both contemporaries and later people appropriated the ruler's authority for their own agendas.

In premodern China, the panegyric stelae inscriptions of the First Emperor of Qin (r. 247–221 BCE as king over a rapidly increasing realm, and r. 221–210 BCE as emperor without peer) almost became a laughing stock for later generations. Soon after the Qin regime's demise, the Western Han thinker Jia Shan (fl. 175 BCE) contrasted the narratives in the inscriptions from the Kuaji and Langye mountains with the brevity of the Qin Empire, suggesting that the Qin emperor was ignorant about his own faults and overestimated his own virtue.¹¹⁵ As time progressed, however, the negative reception of these stelae waned.¹¹⁶ One of the most intriguing accounts concerning the First Emperor's stelae comes from the Tang statesman Du You (735–812 CE). In his encyclopaedic institutional history *Tongdian* Du portrays the materiality of the First Emperor's stele and other related artefacts on Mount Tai. In addition to the stele, Du writes, the Qin emperor's utterance to heaven was inscribed on a multistrip artefact made of gold and was put in a stone container, sealed with clay mixed with gold powder and bearing a jade label.¹¹⁷ The description of this setting, however, was probably

¹¹³ On the defacing of Nero's portraits after his death, see Calomino 2016, 67–79. On countermarks for economic reasons, see Howgego 1986.

¹¹⁴ That the Second Emperor's edict never appears independently on weights or measures suggests that its intention was to accompany the writing of the First Emperor; see Sanft 2014, 60.

¹¹⁵ Ban Gu et al., *Hanshu* 51, 2332.

¹¹⁶ Lu Qinli, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 921; Zhan Ying, *Wenxin diaolong yizheng*, 803.

¹¹⁷ Du You, *Tongdian* 54, 1508.

anachronistic and differed from the actual inscribed artefacts of the First Emperor.¹¹⁸ In fact, Du You's description of the Qin emperor's golden scroll echoes the jade scroll used by the Tang emperors in their *feng* sacrifices.¹¹⁹ By construing the materiality and text of the Qin-era rulership writing, Du traced the origin of a contemporaneous practice to the beginning of the imperial Chinese period. This fictional monument thus usurped the authority of the actual stele of the Qin emperor, turning it into evidence for the authority of the later Tang ruler.

Interactions with rulership writing can also be found in literature. To give only one example among many: in the seventeenth-century German drama *Ibrahim Sultan* by Daniel Casper von Lohenstein (1635–1683), the protagonist, a violent sultan, receives a letter of reprimand from his council. Before even reading the letter, the Sultan Ibrahim is angered that the letter had not been immediately burnt by his henchmen; the provocation here seems to be occasioned not by the letter's content, but by its mere presence. In reaching the addressee via the text-bearing artefact, the opposing party has managed to penetrate the inner circle of power. The sultan then refuses to read the letter and rips it apart, demanding that its shreds be sent back to the senders (along with the dismembered body of an ally). By destroying the letter, Ibrahim not only answers the missive, but also tries to annihilate its message retroactively. The scene epitomises how meaning is generated not only through what is written, but also in the transmission of this text—how it is delivered and received—and in the material interactions with the writing. Not least, it shows how rulers rely on the symbolic (and political) power of these interactions.

118 The stele inscription which Du You cites in his *Tongdian* does not match that which appears in other transmitted sources such as the *Shiji* by Sima Qian et al. A Northern Song (960–1279) witness, Liu Qi, who saw the First Emperor's stele on Mount Tai in 1108, makes no mention of the stone container in Du's account. Liu also reveals that the emperor's stele was only ca. 1.5 metres in height, and unlike stelae made by later rulers, the stone was “an irregular, roughly finished boulder”; its four sides, all of which were inscribed, were of unequal width. Liu's account conforms to extant rubbings of the stele inscription. This contrasts sharply with the lavish setting that Du You narrated in *Tongdian*; see Harist 2008, 223.

119 Du You, *Tongdian* 54, 1514–1522. To date, no actual inscribed artefacts that the emperors used in the *feng* sacrifices to Heaven have been discovered. For an image of the ‘jade’ (in fact marble) multi-strip artefact used by Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (r. 713–756) in a *shan* sacrifice to Earth—which was as important as the *feng* sacrifice—dated to 725 CE, see the *National Cultural Heritage Database*: <https://nchdb.boch.gov.tw/assets/overview/antiquity/20140421000006> (accessed 28/9/2021).

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Abbreviations and Sigla

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