

Global Epigraphy: The Scholarship on Inscriptions of Eurasia from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period

Andreas Rhoby, Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail and Andreas Zajic*

The European fifteenth century not only saw the advent of humanism as a new cultural phenomenon as a whole that fostered a ground-breaking shift in social discourses and politics, it also gave birth to a new paradigm of erudition that included a common code or intellectual habitus of learned elites. An ever-increasing interest in the distant ancient past, especially Greek and Roman Antiquity, led to a widespread enthusiasm for textual and material sources and relics of centuries past, a concern with the study of history that usually goes under the label of antiquarianism. Among the scholarly disciplines that were established within this framework in the early modern period, epigraphy, the science of ancient inscriptions, held pride of place. With epigraphic sylloges reproduced and distributed in manuscript form and later on in print, scholars and humanistic amateurs laid the cornerstone of what later turned into the academic routine of editing Roman and Greek inscriptions, with several epigraphical series as heirs and successors of primeval humanistic ambitions. In the nineteenth century, two prominent series were established at the Königlich-Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin: the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) and the *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* (CIG) (later *Inscriptiones Graecae* [IG]).¹

On 12th March 1890, in Vienna the philosophical-historical class of the Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften set up the »Commission für archäologische Erforschung Klein-Asiens« at the request of Otto Benndorf. From the outset, the Commission's work focused on inscriptions and topographical research. At the same time, the series of the *Tituli Asiae Minoris* (TAM) was founded. Since then, TAM as well as the corresponding supplementary volumes (ETAM) belong to the traditional corpora and series which are located at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW).²

* Correspondence details: Priv.-Doz. Mag. Dr. Andreas Rhoby, Institute for Medieval History, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hollandstraße 11-13, 1020 Vienna, Austria; email: andreas.rhoby@oeaw.ac.at; Mag. Dr. Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail, Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hollandstraße 11-13, 1020 Vienna, Austria; email: veronika.scheibelreiter@oeaw.ac.at; and Priv.-Doz. Mag. Dr. Andreas Zajic, Institute for Medieval History, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hollandstraße 11-13, 1020 Vienna, Austria; email: andreas.zajic@oeaw.ac.at.

- 1 For a detailed description of the development, scientific goals, prerequisites, organisational structures, but also scientific-political strategies of the epigraphic corpora enterprises of the Berlin Academy, see Rebenich, Berlin und die antike Epigraphik.
- 2 The history of the Commission and the development of TAM is described in detail by Dobesch, Hundert Jahre Kleinasiatische Kommission. The development of TAM in contrast to the Berlin Corpora is shown by Halloff, Berliner Corpus.

The Academy's focus on ancient Greek inscriptions was emphasised in recent years by its participation in the *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (SEG). Founded in 1923, the SEG is an international publication project that collects, comments and makes available the annual new publications of Greek inscriptions as well as their new readings and interpretations. The SEG (which can also be consulted online)³ is an indispensable working tool for every epigrapher, as well as, more generally, for every classicist.⁴

Whereas the study of ancient Greek and Roman inscriptions is certainly among the oldest disciplines of auxiliary sciences of history, research on post-Roman epigraphy had not been established throughout larger parts of Europe before the late nineteenth century. Within the above-mentioned CIG series, one section was devoted to what was then called »Greek Christian Inscriptions«. However, despite a considerable number of Greek inscriptions which were produced in the Byzantine Empire and territories which formerly belonged to Byzantium (e.g., Egypt, Syria, Southern Italy, fourth-fifteenth centuries, and beyond), little attention has been paid to these inscriptions (of which many are painted on church walls or on icons, or are incised in metal objects) until recently. A new project entitled *Inscriptiones Graecae Aevi Byzantini* (IGAB), which is also based at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, now focuses on the research on Byzantine inscriptions and its contextualisation.⁵

As to post-Roman inscriptions in Latin script, large scale national corpus enterprises did not come into existence before the late 1930s, when the inter-academy edition series of »Die Deutschen Inschriften« was founded as a cooperation between all German academies of sciences and the Austrian Academy of Sciences.⁶ Today, the series comprises c. 100 printed volumes (as well as an open access database⁷), presenting medieval and early modern (primarily Latin and German) inscriptions up to the middle of the seventeenth century.

Research on epigraphic material from outside the Euro-Mediterranean region also started in the nineteenth century. A first collection of Tibetan epigraphs, for example, was created as early as the eighteenth century, more systematic research, however, did not start before the second half of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a first systematic survey was conducted by the missionary August Hermann Francke in Ladakh (Kashmir). Despite several valuable publications of Tibetan inscriptions in the twentieth century, epigraphy has always been a somewhat neglected field within Tibetan Studies (as it has been, as noted above, within Byzantine Studies), especially due to political (but also geographical) reasons because fieldwork in places which are not easily accessible has been very difficult.⁸

3 referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/supplementum-epigraphicum-graecum.

4 Each volume is structured geographically and comprises Greek texts from the territories of the entire ancient and early Byzantine world; the latest inscriptions entering the SEG date from the eighth century AD. At the Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture (IKAnt/Department of *Documenta Antiqua*) currently all of Asia Minor except Caria is covered.

5 www.oeaw.ac.at/en/byzantine-research/communities-and-landscapes/byzantine-epigraphy. See also Rhoby, *Challenges of Byzantine epigraphy*.

6 Koch, *50 Jahre Deutsches Inschriftenwerk; id.*, *Epigraphische Editionen europaweit*.

7 www.inschriften.net.

8 Tropper, *Epigraphy. On the history of research on Tibetan inscriptions*, see also the contribution by Christian Jahoda in this volume: *Inscriptions*.

The scientific ties between the aforementioned enterprises – albeit differing in the time of their origins, their scope and editorial guidelines – should seem close enough to allow for at least a basic joint approach toward the subject of inscriptions.

Yet, even a definition of inscriptions is far from being uncontested within, for example, post-Roman (medieval and early modern) epigraphy, and depends greatly on diverging national traditions of academia. The late Munich medievalist Rudolf Kloos regarded inscriptions as writing on genuinely epigraphic material such as stone, wood, metal, textiles and so on, carried out by means and by writers who do not belong to the spheres of contemporary scriptoria and/or chanceries.⁹ This definition has, at least in Central and Central Eastern Europe, certainly constituted an imaginary borderline between a medieval manuscript culture that should be studied by palaeographers and codicologists and an epigraphic scene, which still struggles to emerge from the neglected margins of established scholarly work. Basically, inscriptions are texts like any other, but very often displayed in public spaces instead of in archives or manuscript collections. However, interaction between the script of epigraphs and manuscripts is well documented: distinctive uncial types of Greek and Latin public inscriptions are imitated in manuscripts and minuscule handwriting found its way into incised or painted inscriptions. One also has to stress that the definition used by Kloos and others is not fully appropriate for other inscriptional cultures: so-called »paper inscriptions« attached to walls in sacred spaces of Western Tibet¹⁰ prove that the definition of epigraphy varies from culture to culture.

The aspect of publicity of inscriptions, on the other hand, was stressed by the grand old man of French epigraphy, Poitiers' Robert Favreau. When defining inscriptions he emphasised the criteria of durability (»longue durée«) and publicity (»publicité«)¹¹. Epigraphic reality turns out to be more complex and rather caught in the middle between the two attitudes. If medieval epigraphers from two neighbouring European countries tend to disagree on crucial aspects of their discipline, how broad would the gap be between neighbouring epigraphic disciplines investigating classic Roman or Byzantine inscriptions, not to mention between Euro-Mediterranean and Central or Southeast Asian inscriptions?

It was only a matter of time before three ÖAW affiliated scholars working on Antiquity/Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (both West and East) started to discuss joint perspectives of epigraphic research transgressing their respective epochal and geographical limitations. When – at the turn of the year 2016 – the ÖAW concentrated a number of research institutes from the humanities, then scattered over several places in Vienna, in a common site at Hollandstraße (1020 Wien), this stimulated Andreas Rhoby (IMAFO, Division of Byzantine Studies), Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail (IKANT, Documenta Antiqua) and Andreas Zajic (IMAFO, Division of Text Edition and Source Studies – MIR) to put forward an initiative »Epigraphik in der Hollandstraße«, meant to bolster informal exchange between those scholars working on site who dedicate at least part of their research to inscriptions in the broadest sense. We thought that we should try to find comparative perspectives toward epigraphy

9 Kloos, *Einführung in die Epigraphik*, 1-4.

10 Scherrer-Schaub, *Classifying, questioning and interpreting*.

11 Favreau, *Épigraphie médiévale*, 31: »L'inscription a pour fonction de porter une information à la connaissance du public le plus large et pour la plus longue durée, d'assurer une communication en vue d'une publicité universelle et durable«.

that would enable us to consider jointly inscriptions from a stretch of time spanning from Classical Antiquity to the nineteenth century and from a geographic space ranging from the Mediterranean and Central Europe to Asia. In the ÖAW building at Hollandstraße we are lucky enough to benefit from the expertise of collaborators from several institutes of the ÖAW Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, who work in the fields of classical Antiquity, oriental and European archaeology, western Middle Ages, Byzantium, Iranian studies, the cultural and intellectual history of Asia and social anthropology. The motivation behind this initiative was and is the discussing of the methodological approaches to inscriptions, regardless of which period and which region they stem from. Our, the organisers' and participants', specific interest is to discuss common questions, and we are curious to learn about each other's perspectives.

As a first topic, which we hoped would be inspiring to the multi-national and multi-disciplinary group of scholars we had addressed with our idea of a starting workshop (on 22nd March 2018), we chose an approach focusing on the interaction of the inscribed objects and the places in which they were originally located. The visualisation of (epigraphic) writing in public space depends on several complex parameters and varies widely in its results according to the intention of those who conceived it. Claiming that at least the majority of inscriptions were media intended to draw the attention of readers, we proposed that the execution of a text carved in stone or painted on walls required exact consideration of where to present it. Accordingly, the relations between inscriptions and their placement and spatial context were discussed in the course of the first workshop.

The second workshop (on 29th November 2018) focused on a topic which is equally important for epigraphic cultures ranging from Europe to Asia: »self-presentation« or, as was coined by Stephen Greenblatt, »self-fashioning«.¹² It is not only donors who present themselves in the most favourable way; even craftsmen (such as stonemasons) find ways to publish their deeds. An important role is played by the transculturally existing memorial culture, as well as by the founders' and sponsors' need to preserve their foundation beyond death. Common trends in this respect were testified to by presentations on autobiographical monumental hieroglyphic inscriptions in Egypt; Greek inscriptions in which rulers present themselves extraordinarily; Greek and Latin inscriptions about late antique bishops and their secular foundations, as well as by inscriptions from Western Tibet and inscriptions of Sanskrit culture. Sanskrit culture is of specific interest insofar as the spoken word has greater significance than the written word, which, in earlier scholarship, led to the misunderstanding that the absence of written evidence is proof of the absence of knowledge of writing in India.¹³ Furthermore, it is interesting to see how Sanskrit turned from a sacred to a public language in inscriptions.¹⁴

A third workshop (on 22nd-23rd January 2020) will again address a crucial aspect of global epigraphy: it will discuss the question of the presentation of the »foreign« in inscriptions. This transcultural and diachronic topic is also of great interest for our contemporary world.

Inscriptions, regardless of when and in which culture they were/are produced, are therefore not dead matter but messages that interact with their reading, beholding and listening, literate, semi-literate and even illiterate audience.

12 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.

13 Apte, »Spoken Word«; Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy* 7-10, 64-65, 68-70.

14 On this issue, see Pollock, *Language of the Gods*.

The papers by Elisabeth Rathmayr and Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail (»Archaeological Contexts of Inscriptions in the Private Sphere. The Mosaic Inscriptions of a *villa rustica* in Skala/Cephalonia«) and Christian Jahoda (»Inscriptions in Areas of Historical Western Tibet [*mNga' ris skor gsum*] in their Contexts. A Brief Overview with Selected Examples«) published in the special section of *Medieval Worlds* deal with aspects which were discussed within the previous workshops. While Rathmayr and Scheibelreiter-Gail's contribution addresses the question of the self-presentation and self-perception of a homeowner in Roman imperial period Greece, Jahoda's paper gives an overview about the various manifestations of epigraphy in the areas of historical Western Tibet. Although the papers differ greatly in their content, similarities, which are also of interest for other epigraphic cultures, can be traced. The spatial and functional contexts of Western Tibetan inscriptions closely resemble the functions of inscriptions from Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The use of inscriptions as a means for self-representation is a transcultural phenomenon: it is traceable in the mosaic inscriptions of the *villa rustica* in Skala as well as on Tibetan stela epigraphs. In addition, the variety of surfaces to which inscriptions in Central Asia are attached is also attested in the Euro-Mediterranean region (stone, metal, clay, cloth). Differences are obvious as well: while the mosaic inscriptions of Skala belong to an elite residential building, the density of Western Tibet inscriptions is especially high in and around Buddhist monasteries. Their spatial distribution rather reminds one of the context of Byzantine Greek inscriptions, which are primarily to be found in churches and monasteries, and on objects which belong to them. As a result, both case studies are good examples of the global and diachronic approach of the »Epigraphik in der Hollandstraße« initiative.

Even though a comparative approach toward pre-modern inscriptions as a global phenomenon certainly challenges the engaged scholars in several ways – not least with regard to the need to find a suitable joint terminology for a discussion of sources that vary broadly in many respects – we are convinced that cooperation will lead us to a deeper understanding of general aspects of epigraphic writing. Whereas recent suggestions of fostering collaboration between neighbouring epigraphic research enterprises in Germany seem to focus primarily on a homogenisation of technical solutions (relating to data models, databases and DH infrastructure), we are confident that we can bring about a productive and sustainable shift in perspectives on epigraphy through a topic-oriented method of scholarly exchange. The epigraphic papers in this issue are only intended to lead the way for others of their kind. It is the aim of the organisers of the »Epigraphik in der Hollandstraße« workshop series to invite scholars from outside the pool of collaborators at Hollandstraße to join in the common initiative of establishing a cluster on comparative epigraphic studies (the third workshop in January 2020 will be a first step into this direction).

References

Abbreviations

CIG = *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*

CIL = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*

IGAB = *Inscriptiones Graecae Aevi Byzantini*

SEG = *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*

TAM = *Tituli Asiae Minoris* (ETAM = *Ergänzungsbände zu den Tituli Asiae Minoris*)

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