BEYOND SCRIBO
Talking Images

Book of Abstracts
WORKSHOP Beyond SCRIBO

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
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DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOLOGIA CLASSICA E ITALIANISTICA

INSCRIBE
INVENTION OF SCRIPTS
AND THEIR BEGINNINGS

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Investigating the Cognitive Affordances of Symbolic Artefacts

Over the last couple of decades, new kinds of controlled lab experiments have been utilized to investigate processes of language evolution (Nölle, J. & Galantucci, B., 2023). One of the advantages of experiments is that they can test the plausibility of causal hypotheses and thus provide a privileged window to the potential underlying mechanisms driving evolutionary processes inaccessible to cross-sectional and anthropological approaches. This kind of work has been pivotal in demonstrating how symbolic practices can evolve from scratch to become structured and systematic communication systems (and ultimately natural languages), without assuming major or sudden genetic changes (Christiansen & Chater, 2008).

Dating back as far as 100 ka, the Blombos ochre and the Diepkloof ostrich egg engravings from South Africa are considered among the earliest fossilized evidence of human symbolic behavior (Henshilwood et al., 2009; Texier et al., 2013). Of special interest is the temporal trajectory spanning more than 40 thousand years from earlier simpler parallel line patterns to later complex cross-hatchings suggesting an adaptive, compositional development. In a series of lab experiments, we investigate the "cognitive affordances" of patterns from different time points to test whether the development is an expression of an adaptive process of functional optimization for human perception and cognition (Tylén et al., 2020). More concretely, we investigate if line carvings evolve over time to become more salient, reproducible, intentionally expressive and memorizable. Furthermore, we used the early line carvings as seeds in a transmission chain study to test if similar compositional developments can be experimentally elicited through serial reproduction. The experimental observations are used to inform discussions about the potential symbolic function of the original line engravings.

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Between Nature and Culture
Interpreting Changes in Human Representations During the Early Neolithic in Northern Mesopotamia

Prior to the 1990s iconic turn, linguistic epistemologies dominated the interpretation of images. For a long time, isolated signs, icons, and symbols - famously categorized by Panofsky as the triad of pictorial interpretation - were analyzed and molded into a "grammar" in order to understand their content. However, this approach to images overlooked essential information and risked projecting modern thinking onto ancient imagery. The proponents of the iconic turn plainly emphasized that images have various levels of meaning and effects, of which content is just one aspect. We therefore initiated a program that shifts focus towards the social, cognitive, and emotional impact ("Wirkmacht") of images. Unlike traditional phenomenological approaches, we combine the results of social neuroscience with media studies in order to approach the social meaning and impact that symbolic systems may have had in illiterate communities. Our focus is on mediality, including reflexivity and emotional reactions that prehistoric imagery may have elicited. We contrast our results from media studies with evidence of daily life in these communities to reveal tensions and fictions. We believe that our approach complements other semiotic studies. In this contribution, we track the continuities and changes of human representations in Northern Mesopotamia from the earliest Holocene to farming communities of the 8th millennium BCE in order to illustrate our method. We will examine the developments in visual depictions of sedentary hunter-gatherer communities, specifically those from Körtik Tepe and Hasankeyf Höyük located near the River Tigris, Jerf el-Ahmar and 'Abr 3 along the Middle Euphrates, and Tell Qaramel situated west of the Euphrates. Additionally, we will examine findings from the long-inhabited sites of Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori, including new findings from significant sites that were recently discovered around the Harran Plain, to the extent that published material permits. Just as reading between the lines can reveal a whole new world to a reader, taking a comprehensive approach to interpreting pictures enables new insights into prehistoric communities. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that only future studies can confirm the validity of our method by comparing pictorial representations from various regions and periods.

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Hieroglyphs Beyond Writing

The Anatolian hieroglyphic script was an autochthonous script invention, used between ca. 1500-700 BCE within different political states, firstly by the Bronze Age Hittite Empire, and subsequently by its Iron Age successor states in Anatolia and Northern Syria. The script can be described as a complex writing system, its individual signs functioning either as logograms or classifiers on a semantic level, or representing syllables on a phonetic one. To date, modern scholars have only paid very limited attention to the fact that the original scribes also explored the intrinsic iconic value of the script.

This paper will consider the coexistence and interaction of different layers of writing, and the potential innate in individual signs as well as groups of signs of writing. Traditionally, ancient – and especially pictorial – writing systems tend to be seen as communicating across a spectrum, ranging on one end from writing as distinct and repeatable linguistic content decipherable by readers of the script to simple conveyance of short pieces of information to non-readers via the pictorial shape of individual characters or short sequences of signs, on the other end. This paper will explore several themes arising from the script's iconicity such as the relationship between art and writing, and information on the socio-cultural environment of the original script users. Moreover, it will question the notion of the script's pictorial aspect being used as primitive almost-writing for the uninitiated. Considering examples of complex iconic references and interference, exploitation of the iconic potential will rather be shown to occupy the opposite end of the writing spectrum, as a multimodal communication which makes full use of the scope of images within fully developed writing, rather than instead of it. Thus, the paper will show how the pictorial may be considered an additional layer capable of strengthening or interfering the primary layer of text, i.e. linguistic messages encoded according to stable rules

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Emblem to Icon in Proto-Elamite Writing?

The shapes of signs in a given writing system reflect cultural particularities of the invention of each script. For example, Egyptian writing uses a large number of signs that depict birds, and the origins of Egyptian writing has been partially sought in Pre-dynastic art. The proto-Elamite writing system of Iran (c. 3200-2900 BC) contains many hundreds of signs, only a minority of which can be recognized as clear depictions of objects, while many more are not easy to classify as iconic, schematic, or geometric. A peculiarity of the system that has previously been noted is its apparent avoidance of depicting humans or human body-parts. This talk explores in further detail the visual referents identifiable in the proto-Elamite signlist, and considers how to approach the many signs in the system which appear to either highly schematic or geometric in origin. We will finally focus on a few examples of apparently non-iconic signs which have been proposed to represent "households", including a well-attested sign series "M327", asking whether it may find archaeological correlate in pendants recovered from Susa and/or in other images known from the proto-Elamite world.

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Art From Calligraphy
Chinese Writing Turns into Artistic Images, Graphic Motives, Choreographic Gesture and Graffiti Tags

This speech wants to take the form of a real treasure hunt: analyzing contemporary artworks of different nature that seem to have nothing to do with Chinese calligraphy, we will discover that it is precisely from Chinese calligraphy that they take inspiration. Chinese calligraphy is the "quintessence" of Chinese culture and is characterized by an extremely coherent and powerful tradition. However, in contemporary times it has undergone a radical change and has evolved into a plethora of new forms in all fields of visual and performing arts. In this speech, some examples of these new forms will be given, in particular with regard to some media-areas, such as: 1) "fine and contemporary arts", where calligraphy became, for example, a naïf painting made of pictographic shapes of characters, an installation based on an abstract combination of dots and lines, or an artistic video of digital strokes; 2) decorative and applied arts, where the characters lost their connection with the linguistic meaning to become decorative elements, graphic motives and captivating shapes used for commercial scopes; 3) performing arts, where the rhythm, dynamism and harmonic movement of calligraphy became a choreographic gesture of a contemporary ballet or a piece of classical music; and even 4) graffiti art, with examples of "charactering" wild-style pieces and cursive tags along the streets. These new forms powerfully resonate with China's rich and enduring cultural tradition and at the same time mirror the sweeping cultural and economic changes that have taken place in China during the last decades, demonstrating the capability of calligraphy to fit into contemporary art forms and keep up with the changing times.

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Moles, Wrinkles, Grimaces, and Smiles
On the Semiotics of Facial Scripts

There are multiple relations between faces and scripts. First, faces can be the bodily canvas in which writing is inscribed. That is the case with tattoos, which have a complex relation with the face: a tabu part of the body for most contemporary tattooing, it is, on the contrary, a tradition bodily surface of inscription in several traditional cultures (including the most famous of them, *Ta Moko*, the permanent marking or "tattoo" as traditionally practiced by Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand). But the face itself can become the object of a 'reading', which is evident in the long and complex tradition of physiognomy. Given the impossibility to expose in-depth the multifarious systems of facial readings in a short talk, the paper will concentrate in particular on those forms of physiognomy that most seem to single out, in the face, a kind of 'natural script': on the one hand, naeviology, that is, the art of reading (and even writing) moles as if they were the punctuation of the secret message held by the face; on the other hand, metoposcopy, which concentrates not on points but on lines, the wrinkles on a forehead. Finally, faces can themselves become the constituent elements of writing. That typically now happens with those extremely widespread scripts that are called emojis, emoticons, and kaomoji. But that is also the case of a curious form of writing, Elkarîl, a script consisting of columns of grimacing faces invented in 2003 by US logothete Mark Rosenfelder. Beyond this cabinet of curiosities containing several items that use faces as support or element of writing and/or reading, the talk will try to address a more general question: is there a deep-seated cognitive relation between the human propension to read faces and that of giving rise to writing systems? Is the face a sort of iconic model for the exercise of the human hermeneutic capability?

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Imagination, Perception, Language, and Writing
A Semiotic Perspective

Starting from Material Engagement Theory (cf. Malafouris 2011) and from the way material culture scaffolds human cognitive skills, I will deal with the relationship between perception, imagination and projection connected to writing. I will outline a semiotic perspective inspired to what Charles Sanders Peirce used to call "diagrammatic thinking", claiming that writing is connected to a more general cognitive semiotic skill that "loses" the object and its physical properties while replacing it with another object with other physical properties of which it represents a projection and not a representation. After that, I will show the difference between a "denotative sign" grounded on *ratio facilis* (cf. Eco 1975) and an "expressive sign" grounded on *ratio difficilis*, in order to outline the specificity of language connected to other semiotic systems.