

The Cluster of Excellence
Understanding Written Artefacts
at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)
cordially invites you to the workshop

Learning to Write

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 9:30 am – 6:30 pm CEST

Friday, 13 June 2025, 10:00 am – 1:15 pm CEST

Warburgstraße 26, 20354 Hamburg

Organised by Uta Lauer (University of Hamburg)

Registration: <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/register/workshop72>

Learning to write is an essential cultural technique which lies at the heart of the production and dissemination of both secular and religious manuscripts. Learning and teaching writing skills is an organised knowledge transfer, be it from an individual teacher to a disciple, or in the form of a school or scriptorium.

The workshop aims to address but is not limited to the following research questions:

- What models did teachers employ for the student to copy? Were there step-by-step techniques for the student to memorise certain forms of script?
- What methods were in place, to correct mistakes in faulty exercise writings?
- The rise, use and effect of writing primers (both handwritten and printed).
- The role of samplers (Germ. Stickmustertuch; Chin. Kesi, cut-silk technique 緯絲) in the writing education of girls.
- The passing on of a distinct family writing style from generation to generation.
- The creation and use of script compendia.
- Writing faster and more beautifully, the development of new types of script to that end (for example 'Spencerian penmanship').

Programme

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 9:30 am – 6:30 pm

- 9:30 – 9:45 Registration
- 9:45 – 10:05 Introduction by Konrad Hirschler (University of Hamburg) and Uta Lauer (University of Hamburg)

Session 1

Chair: Jost Gippert (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities)

- 10:05 – 10:45 Michael A. Freeman (Texas Tech University)
A “Human Turn” in the Study of Scribal Cultures
- 10:45 – 11:20 Paul Delnero (Johns Hopkins University)
Learning to Write in Mesopotamia
- 11:20 – 11:40 Coffee Break
- 11:40 – 12:20 Kirsten Burke (Harvard University)
Learning to Write in Renaissance Germany
- 12:20 – 13:00 Luigi Orlandi (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities)
Writing Greek in Italian Humanism: Graphic Mimetism at the School of Byzantine Teachers
- 13:00 – 2:30 Lunch Break

Session 2

Chair: Shervin Farridnejad (University of Hamburg)

- 2:30 – 3:10 Eugenio Garosi (Radboud University)
Learning the ABĠ: Arabic School Texts from the Early Islamic Empire
- 3:10 – 3:50 Scott Bucking, ONLINE (DePaul University Chicago)
Stepping Back and Looking Around: The Beni Hassan Alphabetic Table in Archaeological Context

2:45 – 3:15	Coffee Break
4:10 – 4:50	Carlo Cereti, ONLINE (University of California, Irvine) <i>On the Language and Scripts of the Sasanian Empire</i>
4:50 – 5:30	Weitian Yan, ONLINE (Indiana University Bloomington) <i>Learning from Inscriptions: Epigraphic Study and Modes of Copying in Qing China</i>
6:30	Dinner

Friday, 13 June 2025, 10:00 am – 1:15 pm

Session 3

Chair: Christiane Reck (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities)

10:00 – 10:40	Yutaka Yoshida (Kyoto University) <i>Training of Scribes along the Silk Road: A Case from Manichaean Sogdian</i>
10:40 – 11:20	Márton Vér (University of Hamburg) <i>Chinese Learning along the Eastern Silk Roads: The Uyghur case (9th to 14th cc.)</i>
11:20 – 11:40	Coffee Break
11:40 – 12:20	Addisie Yalew Mengitsu (University of Hamburg) <i>Scribes and Practices of Writing in Twenty-first Century Gondar Area, Ethiopia</i>
12:20 – 1:00	Artistic contribution <i>tba</i>
1:00 – 1:15	Closing Remarks

Abstracts and Contributors

Scott Bucking (DePaul University Chicago)

Stepping Back and Looking Around: The Beni Hassan Alphabetic Table in Archaeological Context

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 3:20 pm – 3:50 pm

Since its initial discovery in the 1800s, the Greco-Coptic alphabetic table painted on the wall of an adaptatively reused rock-cut tomb in the Beni Hassan necropolis of Middle Egypt has attracted much scholarly attention, especially among historians of ancient education. In this paper, I will argue for stepping back a bit from the table itself and looking around at the many other cultural features of the Beni Hassan archaeological landscape. Although the table, which consists of alphabets and a syllabary, may very well be an artifact of Late Antique pedagogy, I believe that a better understanding of the physical and social setting of its production will aid in a more robust interpretation. To achieve this aim, I will draw from my ongoing fieldwork at Beni Hassan to present and discuss the archaeological and epigraphic data I have collected from the tomb containing the table (i.e., Tomb No. 23), as well as from the other adaptively reused tombs in the necropolis. The data provide significant evidence of ritual practice associated with Late Antique monasticism, which helps to construct a critical contextual framework for analyzing the alphabetic table.

Kirsten J. Burke (Harvard Society of Fellows)

Learning to Write in Renaissance Germany

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 11:40 am – 12:20 pm

This talk explores the artistic world of calligraphic pedagogy in Northern Europe through the lens of sixteenth-century German writing manuals. While Italian art theory dominates our understanding of Renaissance art history, this research recovers the contribution of a parallel *calligraphic* Renaissance under the auspices of writing teachers such as Johann Neudörffer the Elder (1497-1563) of Nuremberg. These writing manuals were revolutionarily pedagogical, reverse-engineering letters both as visual forms and as vehicles for transformative expression. Rather than declining with the advent of printmaking, learning to write took on even greater significance as new technologies in turn catalyzed new attempts at articulating the plurality of calligraphic practices. I argue that writing pedagogy had high stakes. It could serve both as a mode of art-making and of *self*-making for figures such as merchants who moved through an increasingly

globalized world of varied graphic traditions. In early modern Germany specifically, these archives reveal writing's importance beyond technical instruction. They illuminate the period's relationship between language and art, while opening up potential connections between European Renaissance artistic traditions and broader cross-cultural calligraphic practices.

Carlo Cereti (University of California, Irvine)

On the Language and Scripts of the Sasanian Empire

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 4:10 pm – 4:50 pm

The author will present and discuss several inscriptions and documents in Middle Persian, aiming at highlighting the contribution of primary sources, specifically coeval written sources to the reconstruction of the spreading of Persian to a vast Iranian speaking area during the long Middle Iranian millennium. He will emphasize the gradual extension of the Persian speaking world in the Sasanian period, when the presence of an Empire that grew more and more centralized with the passing of the centuries gradually led to a common language of communication throughout the Empire. A language that was the tongue of the administration, the language of culture and religion, and the language of the army. The aim of this paper is to show that by late Sasanian times literacy was not limited to the élites, rather Middle Persian was written by many, and had by then spread to the entire Sasanian empire and beyond its borders.

Paul Delnero (Johns Hopkins University)

Learning to Write in Mesopotamia

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 10:45 am – 11:20 am

There is a wealth of evidence for education in ancient Mesopotamia exceeding that of any culture or period of the ancient or pre-modern world. At the city of Nippur, the religious center of Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BCE, the entire sequence of lists and texts that were taught to pupils learning to write can be reconstructed from the beginning until the end of their training. By studying the thousands of exercise copies produced by Mesopotamian pupils at different stages in their education, a vivid picture emerges of not only what students learned, but also how and why they learned it.

In the earliest stages of learning to write, pupils began their training by copying an elementary list of mostly simple cuneiform signs repeated in different sequences throughout the list. This list was followed by lists of personal names, thematic word lists, and a more extensive sign list, consisting of over 800 basic and complex signs, listed together with their syllabic pronunciations. This group of lists, which form the core of the elementary curriculum, was intended to

teach how cuneiform signs were pronounced and combined to form names and common words, but even more primarily, how to write the signs correctly and in accordance with the handwriting and formatting conventions of the time. In this paper, the pupils' copies of these lists will be examined to show how writing was learned in Mesopotamia.

Michael Abraham Freeman (Texas Tech University)

A "Human Turn" in the Study of Scribal Cultures

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 10:05 am – 10:45 am

The history of the book has been constructed through centuries of scribal labor, but scribes have in a number of ways been made "invisible" in narratives about ancient book production. The very language our disciplines use to discuss scribes too often participates in this erasure which dates to antiquity, disembodiment scribes and stripping them of humanity. We speak about their place in the history of the book as the ancient equivalent of the printing press or the copying machine. When we refer to their contributions to manuscripts, we give them names like "Hand 1" and "Hand 2," as if there were no body and no mind behind the hands writing a particular script.

I urge that we must re-approach the history of the book giving full attention to the lived experiences of scribes themselves, to their humanity. Scribes were not mindless hands set to writing texts or copying books; they were people, individuals with lives and with bodies that shaped their lives and experiences. My research aims to put the bodies, to put the full human back behind these hands that write our texts.

In this paper, I will outline methodologies used in my research to pursue this "human turn" in the study of scribes and book history in general. I will (1) speak about ways historians might glimpse the lived experiences of scribes in the ancient Mediterranean world; I will (2) unpack how scribal labor has been made invisible and how scholars might elevate its visibility in our study of manuscript culture; and I will (3) explore the kind of intimate "embodied" understanding of book production that can only be fully possessed and appreciated by a practitioner of the craft themselves. Each of the approaches to scribal practices that I will discuss, in addition to emending the inhumane way we have too often thought about scribes, also, I urge, restores critical knowledge about the history of ancient Mediterranean reading and writing culture, knowledge that is otherwise inaccessible because it is inseparably bound up with the scribe's humanity.

Eugenio Garosi (Radboud University, Nijmegen)

Learning the ABĠ: Arabic School Texts from the Early Islamic Empire

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 2:30 pm – 5:20 pm

A surprising number of the relatively few Arabic original documents that survive from the first two centuries after the rise of Islam are school texts and writing exercises. These documents offer us rare glimpses into the channels, contexts and media involved in the acquisition and perfecting of Arabic literacy during a period in which knowledge of Arabic – let alone the ability to write in Arabic – would still have been the prerogative of only a minority of the population.

Drawing from select documentary evidence on papyrus and ostraca from different corners of the Umayyad and early Abbasid empires, my talk will present a survey of early Islamic Arabic school texts based on their content, presumable training goals, and the domains of literacy being focused on. Subsequently, the paper discusses in greater detail what these historical sources can tell us on the teaching methods, infrastructure, media and curricula associated with Arabic language learning in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Addisie Yalew Mengistu (University of Hamburg)

Scribes and Practices of Writing in Twenty-first Century Gondar Area, Ethiopia

Friday, 13 June 2025, 11:40 am – 12:20 pm

Ethiopia has long-standing scribal practices since late antiquity; this also places Ethiopia in a unique position because the country is one of the few countries with active scribal practice and mass production of manuscripts. However, this long-standing practice of writing has been little studied, with scarce studies about the professional pathway of scribes. There has also been no study about contemporary practices of learning to write for copying. The primary purpose of this study is to reconstruct the professional pathway of scribes and examine contemporary changes, continuities, and innovations in the practices of writing in the twenty-first-century Gondar area, Ethiopia. I used the primary source data collection method through fieldwork in 'Andābet, Gondar, Ethiopia. Observations, interviews and digitisation of manuscripts in private collections are applied. This study uses a narrative analysis method of qualitative research. The result of this research indicates that many scribes learned their profession by writing Ləfāfa-ṣədq scrolls. Ləfāfa-ṣədq is short and often made from leftover (small pieces of parchment) of codex leaves. 'Andābet, a district in the southeastern part of the Gondar region in Ethiopia, is known as a centre of calligraphy (learning centre to handwriting). The scribal profession in 'Andābet passed down through families traditionally.

Luigi Orlandi (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities)

Writing Greek in Italian Humanism: Graphic Mimeticism at the School of Byzantine Teachers

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 12:20 pm – 1:00 pm

Research on the phenomenon of so-called ‘graphic mimeticism’ during the fifteenth century represents one of the most prolific lines of investigation in the field of Greek paleography. A pioneering role was played by the contributions of Ernesto Berti and Antonio Rollo, who explained the characteristics of the ‘mimetic’ rendering of the writings of the Byzantine masters by their respective students, i.e. fifteenth-century Italian humanists. It is worth remembering that the imitation of the masters’ writing was the natural outcome of graphic learning within the school. By learning to write in Greek in adulthood, pupils could merely reproduce in their manuscripts the graphic model proposed by the master. Rarer are the cases of humanists (such as Francesco Filelfo and Guarino da Verona) capable of developing their own graphic system, i.e. a style characterised by elements of strong personalisation. A different aspect of graphic mimesis, mostly (but not necessarily) unrelated to the school context, is that we can define ‘antiquarian’ mimesis. It is a mimetic phenomenon aimed at enhancing the graphic product through the adoption of forms that are not current, but older by a few centuries; this process gives the writing an archaising aspect and to some extent amplifies the authority of the copied text. While researching the scholarly and scribal activity of Andronikos Kallistos, who was a successful teacher in several Italian cities, numerous testimonies of ‘mimetic’ scripts emerged; precisely on the basis of the principle of ‘graphic mimeticism’ it was possible to assign these scripts (the work of little-known or completely anonymous persons) to the school of Kallistos. This talk mainly aims to take up the essential issues concerning the research on Kallistos’ milieu. In addition, a comparison will be undertaken between the case of Kallistos’ pupils and other humanists who learned to write in Greek at the school of other Byzantine masters, such as Demetrios Kastrenos, Demetrios Chalkondyles, Georgios Hermonymos.

Márton Vér (University of Hamburg)

Chinese Learning along the Eastern Silk Roads: The Uyghur Case (9th to 14th cc.)

Friday, 13 June 2025, 10:40 am – 11:20 am

By the latter half of the first millennium CE, literary Chinese had become a widely employed medium in East and Central Asia, initially due to Han imperial expansion and subsequently through the diffusion of Sinitic Buddhism. While its influence on Japan, Korea, and Vietnam has been extensively studied, the Central Asian context remains comparatively understudied. Nonetheless, from the mid-first millennium onwards, Chinese texts were translated into Central

Asian languages, and by the second half of this period, fragments of translations, as well as Chinese texts with phonetic transcriptions in Sogdian, Tibetan, Tangut, and Uyghur, have been preserved. The Old Uyghur corpus is particularly valuable for two reasons: it represents the most substantial body of internal documentation on Chinese learning by Central Asian populations between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, and the Chinese proficiency of Uyghur literati and monks had significant historical implications, as many attained high-ranking positions in Yuan China.

Despite the scarcity of narrative accounts detailing Uyghur acquisition of Chinese, the wealth of surviving documentary material allows for a reconstruction of this process. This study analyses Uyghur and Uyghur-related Chinese fragments, as well as Sino-Uyghur bilingual texts, to outline the stages of Chinese learning among the Uyghurs. Special emphasis will be placed on writing exercises, Uyghur copies of Chinese primers, including the Qianziwen 千字文 and the Kaimeng yaoxun 開蒙要訓, as well as additional instructional materials, such as Uyghur phonetic glosses on Chinese texts. Furthermore, Uyghur colophons in Chinese Buddhist texts will be examined. While many of these sources have been published, no comprehensive study has yet been undertaken.

Weitian Yan (Indiana University, Bloomington)

Learning from Inscriptions: Epigraphic Study and Modes of Copying in Qing China

Thursday, 12 June 2025, 4:50 pm – 5:30 pm

With the resurgence of “epigraphic study (jinshixue 金石學)” in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), scholars and calligraphers in China turned to inscriptions in stone and bronze as the preferred stylistic models. To gather update-to-date information about epigraphic materials, they traveled to ancient sites to examine engraved monuments. To recover lost inscriptions, they reconstituted fragments of early ink rubbings in their personal studios. Consequently, a diverse range of epigraphic compendia were produced to preserve, organize, and disseminate ancient inscriptions during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In this paper, I focus on three types of epigraphic copies made by Qing antiquarians, including the “double-outline (shuanggou 雙鉤)” tracing copy, the re-engraved replica (fanke 翻刻), and the free-hand innovative transcription (lin 臨). Why did scholars engage in the production of these copies? How did these copies contribute to the transmission of calligraphic knowledge? How did these different modes of copying change the ways in which scholars approached the practice of calligraphy? To answer these questions, I will use several extant copies made by Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733–1818) and his close associates. A form of embodied knowledge, these varied copies provided this generation of

Qing scholars an opportunity to inspect the material surface of inscriptions and guided the development of new calligraphic styles that simulate the effect of carving and erosion.

Yutaka Yoshida (Kyoto University)

Training of Scribes along the Silk Road: A Case from Manichaean Sogdian

Friday, 13 June 2025, 10:00 am – 10:40 am

One of the research questions of the workshop is “what models did teachers employ for the student to copy? Were there step-by-step techniques for the student to memorize certain forms of script?” In this paper, I attempt to address mainly this question by referring to some Manichaean Sogdian manuscripts discovered more than 100 years ago by the so-called German Turfan Expedition from Turfan, modern Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China. These are generally dated to the 10th century. Most of the ancient manuscripts discovered in Central Asia are likely to have been copied or written by professional scribes, who had been trained to copy and compose various kinds of texts. As far as I know, almost nothing has been known about the training of scribes of this area. In this paper I should like to collect materials betraying education and scribes’ training from the Manichaean Sogdian manuscripts discovered in Turfan. They are colophons, drafts, and writing exercises produced by scribes. Teaching materials like teacher’s copies and alphabets are also be referred to. In one interesting case, a novice tries to write a letter to his father and in so doing he seems to have copied the model letter provided by his teacher, from which a small fragment has also survived. However, what he was able to produce appears hardly comprehensible, at least for me, possibly because he was not trained enough. In the presentation, I begin with the Dunhuang Khotanese texts, which clearly attest the training of scribes performed in the 10th century Dunhuang.