

The Cluster of Excellence
Understanding Written Artefacts
cordially invites you to a Thursday Lecture by

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Tablets and Scrolls in the Hands of Clio and Calliope, Two Ancient Muses

Thursday, 23 November 2023, 6:15 pm – 8:00 pm CET
Warburgstraße 26, 20354 Hamburg

Hybrid Event

Registration: <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/en/register/lecture38>

It seems to have been generally established that by the High Roman Empire, the attributes of the nine Muses had stabilized and regularized in the artistic representations in which they appeared. In particular, Clio (the Muse of History) mostly appeared with a tablet and stylus, and Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry) mostly appeared with a scroll. Why was there this differentiation, and what might it have meant? In this talk, I build on arguments I once made about a tablet's capacity to capture and fix an authoritative version of reality, and explore why this Roman understanding of the meaning of the object made the tablet a particularly appropriate attribute for the Roman Muse of History. Historians could make authoritative claims to understand the past, while Clio, being a goddess, could write authoritative history as it happened—and thus the tablet was appropriate. Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, could also make claims about the past, but more often came to do so with a scroll, the preferred medium for most literary production and especially for poetry, which made fewer truth claims than history. The clear (if not total) delineation of what each Muse carried is an artistic phenomenon of the period after AD 70, when Roman historians themselves were fighting a lively battle over truthful and authoritative history-writing and denigrating rivals for poetical flights of fancy.