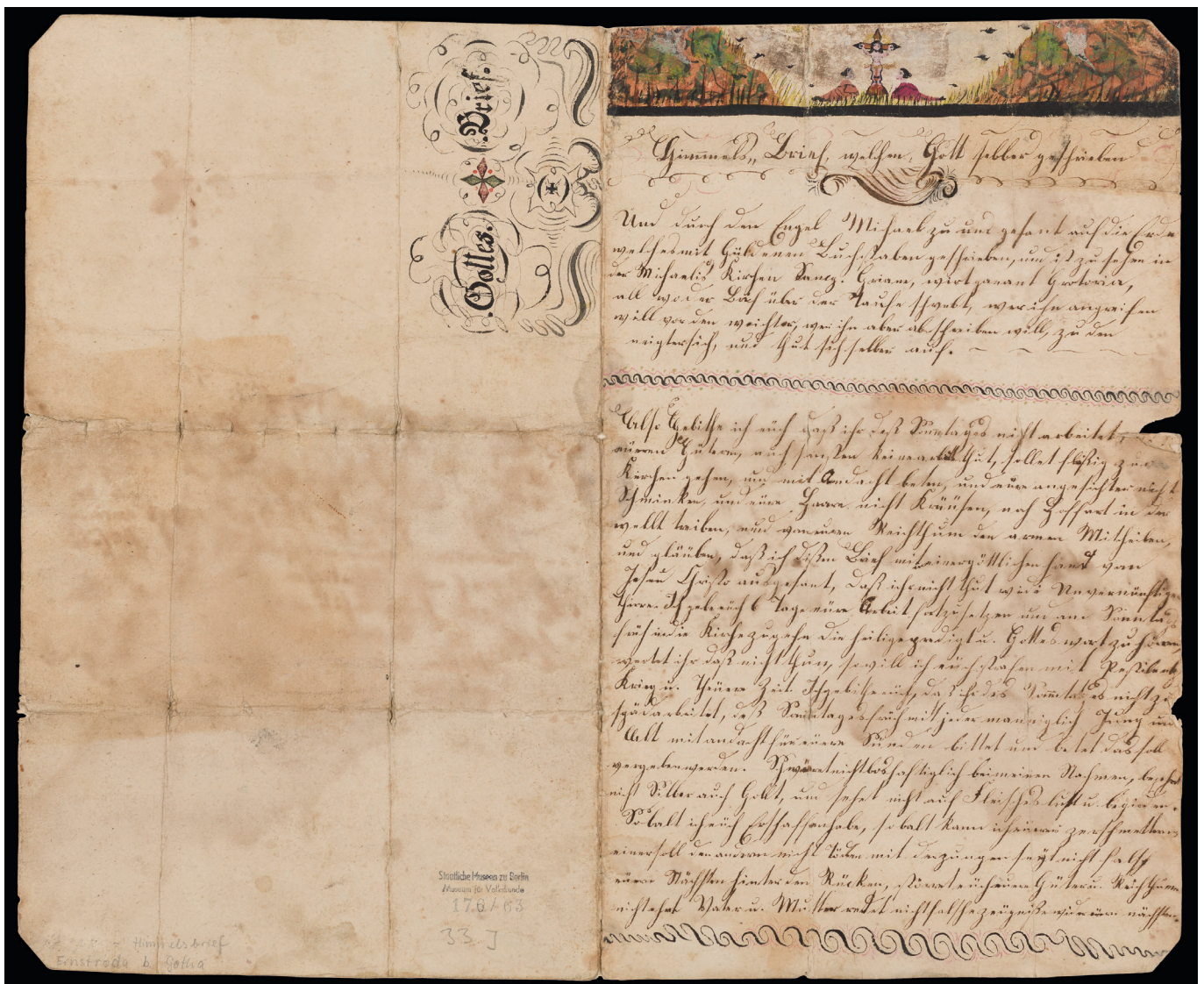


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Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Edited by Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz

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Cover

A 'letter from Heaven', ID no. I (33 J) 176/1963, Berlin, Museum of European Cultures (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum Europäischer Kulturen). Written in Ernstroda near Gotha, Thuringia, and dated 1776. The original sheet of paper was folded once, making four pages. Here we can see p. 1 with the title 'Himmels=Brief, welchen, Gott selber geschrieben' ('Letter from Heaven, which God Himself has written') and page 4. The written bifolium was then folded four times. Two words were visible on the two outer sides resulting from this: 'Gottes Brief' ('God's letter'), shown on p. 4. The upper part of the letter has been cropped and part of the illumination has been cut off. Photography: Christian Krug.

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Fig. 1: New York City, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 1984.504.2. Finial of a standard; silver with a black inlay; Iran, early 18th century; $48.9 \times 22.9 \times 4.0$ cm. Standards like this one were typically used by Shi'is in military and religious ceremonies in India. Its form and its inscriptions also provide the standard with an apotropaic function. The object is in the shape of a palm, which is a common symbol in Islam known as the Hand of Fatima, *khamisa* (Arabic for 'five') or *panja* ('paw' in Persian). One of the fingers is missing. The central medallion on the side shown features the names of Allah, the Prophet Muḥammad and members of the Prophet's family. The larger crescent-shaped area contains the Qur'anic 'Throne verse' Q (2:255), which is also typical of talismans. The other side features the name of the twelve imams. The fingers contain Qur'anic verses and Shi'i invocations, the latter partly in Persian. See Farhad 2009, 124–25 on this item and Kemnitz 2023 on the *khamisa* in Islam in general; see also the paper by Berthold in this volume.

Introduction

Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz | Hamburg

The idea that agency can be attributed to inanimate objects, not just humans, and that these can be considered *non-human actors* has become popular in anthropology, art history and the social sciences since being introduced in the late 1990s by British social anthropologist Alfred Gell and then expanded by French sociologist Bruno Latour.¹ The concept here – the agency of objects – has been applied to diverse topics concerned with material culture studies since then. It has not resulted in a unified theory being created, though. Rather, various theoretical approaches have been pursued in parallel. These vary greatly in terms of their theoretical frameworks, but they also differ as to what kinds of non-human actors are considered. The range includes everything from everyday items to works of art, buildings and even the social structures and networks connected with them. Hardly anyone has thought about the agency of manuscripts yet, though, or applied the concept systematically to research on manuscripts or written artefacts in general.

Partly on the grounds of this disparity between existing theoretical approaches to the subject of agency, when dealing with the agency of written artefacts, it generally proves advantageous *not* to take a top-down approach based on the idea that just one concept of agency is valid.² Rather, the subject should preferably be approached with a more open mind, i.e. exploratively when examining manuscripts, and then drawing on appropriate theoretical models. This open-mindedness is also reflected in the contributions to this volume, which draw on highly differing approaches to agency. In view of this diversity, the fundamental understanding of agency formulated

some time ago by linguist and anthropologist Laura Ahearn – ‘Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ – can be helpful as a common basis for research on agency and manuscripts.³ This understanding of agency makes it clear that social interaction and networks can be regarded as its core elements. If we adopt this definition of it, however, it will still be debatable what sociocultural role written artefacts can have and how exactly they acquire their specific agency in the course of their production or use – as a result of their specific materiality, their visual organisation or their content, for instance.

The two sections in this volume represent two focal points in this complex issue: firstly, manuscripts that act as magical agents and directly influence human actors and their behaviour, and secondly, manuscripts that affect or even create social relations between human actors in the course of their production, use or circulation and that shape whole communities this way.

Section I: Manuscripts as Magical Agents

The contributions in this first section are case studies on magical and divinatory written artefacts of different types from a variety of manuscript cultures. The papers illustrate the broad spectrum of written artefacts connected with the topics of magic and agency. Besides the specific materiality connected with their use, such as their size, form and writing materials, magic manuscripts can exhibit specific visual designs, symbols and scripts that may be directly related to their assumed potency. These written artefacts should not merely be seen as passive objects containing texts, but need to be understood as ‘actors’ that unfold their *Wirkmacht* (efficacy) and thus contribute to ‘magically’ influenced realities. Human actors rely on the efficacy of magic manuscripts and simultaneously affirm it in their interaction with them. The potency of such manuscripts

¹ See Gell 1998 and Latour 2005, for instance.

² The complexity of the idea of agency can be seen in the frequent German translation of the English term *agency*, namely *Wirkmacht*, meaning ‘efficacy’ or ‘power’. These two meanings are not completely equivalent to the sense found in the English word *agency*, however; the rather ponderous term *Handlungsfähigkeit* would be a better match in German. Consequently, *Wirkmacht* and *agency* should be regarded as related terms that complement each other conceptually.

³ Ahearn 2001, 112.

can be activated by their very presence, direct contact with the human body when worn in various ways or by the material and visual features the artefacts have. Magical manuscripts structure situations and actions and actively intervene in the everyday world of human actors. Written amulets could thus be considered the most obvious case of *agency* in written artefacts, but so could collections of magical recipes in multiple-text manuscripts (MTMs) and manuals of magic.

After reflecting on the use and meaning of the term *magic* in his paper, Michael Kohs considers the various features that can establish the ‘magical’ agency and efficacy of written artefacts. This agency can be triggered by certain practices during the production and use of written artefacts or by their materiality or content. The author proposes a three-step concept of agency here.

The paper by Farouk Yahya is the first publication dedicated exclusively to a divinatory device from Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula: paper wheels with strings attached to them, which were meant to be put on or over a person’s head. A practitioner would pick one of the predictions written on the manuscript by grasping one of the strings.

Marco Heiles analyses a German codex from the sixteenth century. This MTM contains instructions on performing magical rituals and divinatory practices along with several prayer texts. Many of the formularies and prayers include the name *Reynhard Truges*, who was presumably the owner of the manuscript at one point. This prompts the question of how this codex was used: was it a compendium used as a set of instructions for magical rituals? Or was the codex itself an apotropaic amulet?

Cornelius Berthold takes a look at the functions of miniature Qur’ans in the past. As the handwriting in these tiny manuscripts was usually too small to be read easily, his paper enquires about the status of these codices in relation to other types of manuscripts containing Qur’anic texts or prayers.

The article by Sabine Kienitz explores the field of German *Himmelsbriefe*, or ‘letters from Heaven’, as they are known. Manuscripts and prints containing such texts were carried close to the body in times of severe danger, e.g. by soldiers in wartime or by women giving birth. They were passed on within families and their handwritten form was sometimes supposed to be a precondition for their efficacy.

Finally, in his paper, Karl Schaefer examines the changing agency of Arabic block-print amulets over time in the different stages of their ‘lives’. In considering the ‘afterlife’ of these

artefacts, now removed from their original settings, he asks about the agency they exert on us today.

Section II: Manuscripts Shaping Communities

Many of the papers in the first section point out that the agency of magical written artefacts is often due to their users attributing them the potential to have an immediate effect. The interaction between the bearer of a written artefact and the object itself has the character of a highly personal relationship. Contrastingly, the focus in the contributions to the second section of this volume is on aspects of the agency of manuscripts that have an impact on social groups. Manuscripts and, indeed, written artefacts in general can affect and even create social relations, for example by connecting people in administrative institutions who are actively involved in the production, use and circulation of forms and schedules, which are essentially shared manuscripts, even if they do not know each other from face-to-face communication. In fact, manuscripts may deeply affect an established community, unfolding an emotional sense of belonging and uniting its members in their joint veneration of the artefact, at the same time excluding and isolating any non-members. This can be the case in religious contexts and even in scholarly environments, like teacher–student relationships. The agency of manuscripts can thus shape social and cultural practices.

The articles in this section discuss some of the requirements and consequences of production and reception and the respective quality of social constellations and communities, which are shaped and defined by sharing manuscripts in many ways, among other things. Hence, the agency and impact of a manuscript is not grounded on its content alone, but rather on the materiality of the object itself, depending on the particular writing material used – whether it was valuable or not – and on its performative origin and usage, i.e. the physical act of production by handwriting and further acts of personal signing and authentication. Beyond that, however, the concrete modes and sequences of use, appropriation and appraisal of the artefact must also be taken into account. In this respect, there are many different kinds of practices and physical involvement (and interaction) with handwritten objects. These can range from worshipping the manuscript collectively at a distance (or touching it in a particular way on certain days) to individual use of the written artefact in everyday life (and even to its misuse and deliberate destruction). As the case studies will show, manuscripts can establish ‘actual’ social relationships and



Fig. 2: New York City, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 1998.66, fol. 7'. Illuminated Ge'ez Gospel; Ethiopia, late 14th–early 15th century, parchment, 41.9 × 28.6 × 10.2 cm. The illumination adapts Byzantine iconographic models and shows the ascension of Christ, who is sitting enthroned at the top, surrounded by the symbolised four Evangelists. Mary is encompassed by the twelve apostles in the centre below that. Gospel manuscripts have always been at the heart of faith and practice in all major Christian confessions. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, manuscripts like the one shown above are jointly venerated by the community during liturgical services and processions. The illuminations are shown to the congregation, and believers often kiss the covers of the manuscripts or the illuminations themselves. Such Gospel books can therefore be ascribed a constitutive function, shaping the community. On this manuscript see LaGamma 1998, among others.

consequently shape communities actively, e.g. by connecting the owner, scribe and users of a book in a lending library in the Malay world (van der Putten's article) or by involving experts and connoisseurs as collectors of distinctive manuscript issues in China in the nineteenth century (Lu).

In her paper, Sina Sauer considers administrative documents as constitutive actors of a newly established bureaucratic community in Germany after World War II. In her contribution to the volume, she asks how collective administrative acts depended on the use of completely new printed forms to compensate Jewish Germans for the mass spoliation of their own or their relations' property by the Nazi regime.

In contrast, Jan van der Putten investigates a collection of manuscripts rented out for entertainment at an Indonesian lending library. He shows how the broad interest in popular stories created a community of readers of handwritten artefacts that remained active till the first decade of the twentieth century, by which time printing had become established.

The article by Lu Zhenzhen deals with a commercial landscape for the production and reception of entertainment literature and the respective communities of readers and collectors in nineteenth-century China. Some collectors only had an economic interest in pursuing a collection of valuable manuscripts being sold by a famous copying house in Beijing.

Others were artistic collectors who bought manuscripts for their own private performances – people who had established a virtual community without knowing or having contact with each other by reciting the same contents from manuscripts.

Acknowledgements

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⁴ These were 'Manuscripts as Magical Agents' (11–12 June 2016) and 'Shaping Communities: Manuscripts Affecting Social Relations' (13 July 2018).

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Fig. 2: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Rogers Fund, 1998.