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The Development of the Epigraphic Culture of the Near-Eastern Peoples in the Greco-Roman Period: The Case-Study of the Southern Levant (Phoenicia, Judaea-Palestine and Transjordan).

One of the most important historical sources that we have today for studying the Greco-Roman antiquity are texts inscribed in stone (or in other durable material). However, one may notice that not all preserved inscriptions come from a single period and the number of monuments produced through centuries varies. This most probably reflects different intensity with which inscriptions were produced in different periods. This variety in the distribution of inscriptions as well as the development of different genres of inscriptions (dedications, epigraphs, honorific inscriptions etc.) through centuries prompts us to think of them not only as written texts and inscribed content but also as a cultural phenomenon. Why were inscriptions erected? Why did they adopt such forms? Why did some communities in the Greco-Roman world produced them in some periods and why others did not? All of these issues refer to the so-called epigraphic culture. Whereas this phenomenon has been a subject of research for some decades, there is still many issues that demand work in that field.

In this project I would like to deal with the development of the epigraphic culture in the southern Levant in Greco-Roman period, i.e. in the area situated in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, including Phoenicia, Judaea-Palestine and Transjordan (the territory of the modern states of Lebanon, Israel and partially of Jordan and Syria). For that purpose I intend to gather data on all inscriptions originating from the southern Levant which date to the Greco-Roman period. The collected data will be exploited for constructing the so-called epigraphic curve, i.e. the graphic representation of the number of inscriptions which date to a particular century. I will construct a number of epigraphic curves, which will allow to trace the development of particular features of the epigraphic evidence, e.g. the use of particular languages in the text of inscriptions or the occurrence of certain types of inscriptions. Constructing separate epigraphic curves, both for a region as a whole and for its particular sub-regions, will allow to determine if the development of the epigraphic culture proceeded in the same way all over the Levant or if this process was characterized by different dynamics depending on the sub-region. Furthermore, the data derived from the analysis of the epigraphic curves demand contextualization. For that purpose, it is necessary to juxtapose the epigraphic curve and the evidence with data derived from other sources. In order to do that, I intend to take into consideration the conclusions of other scholars dealing with the history of the southern Levant. For instance, we can ask the question if the growth of the number of inscriptions in particular centuries was somehow correlated with the political or socio-economic situation, or with cultural changes taking place at that time. The answer for that question can be provided only by taking into account research on the epigraphic culture and other issues like research on the political situation or economic life in a particular period. By including this historical background it will be possible to trace the factors that most likely influenced the epigraphic curve and the local epigraphic culture. Thus, it would enable us to establish correlations between great historical changes and the cultural development.

So far the epigraphic culture of the communities inhabiting these areas in antiquity has met with only very limited interest of scholars, who very often seem to perceive inscriptions only as a source of data deriving from the very text, without considering it in terms of a cultural phenomenon in itself. Only very rarely scholars have tried to investigate both the Semitic and Greco-Roman inscriptions. My project aims to overcome these limitations and to provide a holistic insight into the epigraphic culture of the Levantine peoples in a long period between the Persian conquest and the advent of Islam - these wide chronological boundaries will allow to take into consideration the entire process of development of the epigraphic culture (I call this period Greco-Roman due to the growing importance of the Greek epigraphic culture in the Levant that appeared there as early as the Persian rule; furthermore, Greek, as the most important language of inscriptions from that region, survived until the end of the Roman domination in the Near East). The expected effect of my project is a series of papers, which would allow for a better understanding of cultural changes taking place in the southern Levant in that time. Due to the wide extent of the proposed approach, I hope that the conclusions of my work will also be useful to other scholars dealing with the history of this area.