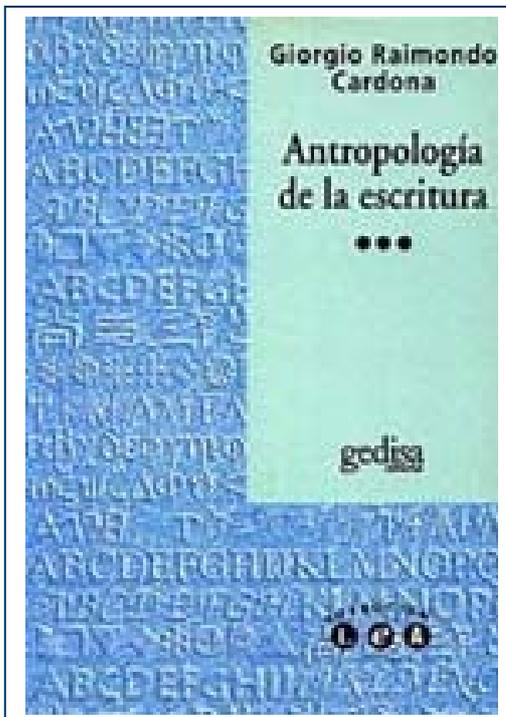


Book review



By Mariluz Puente Balsells, Anthropologist

Antropología de la escritura *(Anthropology of the Writing)*



In his book *Antropología de la Escritura* (Gedisa, 1991) Giorgio Raimondo depicts the efforts of scholars to clarify and conceptualise the terms relating to handwriting, for example, revealing to us that Charles F. Hockett proposed the word “Graphonomy” as the “*yet unnamed scientific study of writing and writing systems*” in his publication *A Course in Modern Linguistics* (NY, Harcourt and Brace, 1958). A similar concept to that used by I.J. Gelb for his “Grammatology”, a word later turned into the title of a book by the deconstructivist Derrida.

Raimondo, who gives a brief review of the origins of handwriting and its evolutionary classification, describes to us the time prior to writing as a group of mnemonic systems whose function was to transcribe limited portions of information through cords or knots, shells, notches in sticks and splints, and how man later started to develop realistic patterns that evoked objects, ideas or situations. From this pictographic stage ideography developed, where patterns were standardized, moving away from the everyday reality and equating language; in this last phonetic period being able to distinguish a syllabic phase and another alphabet.

However, where the author really spends time, relating in meticulous detail, is in the use and symbology of writing by various cultural groups as, in his opinion, this is where the most attractive area of writing lies.

When the author talks to us of “ephemeral writing” he distinguishes between those linked to magical practices, the ink for which is produced with rosewater and saffron, or the blood of a chicken, or those that even trace invisible inscriptions in the air, or on the human body, as for example, with the finger on the forehead of an Islamic child, or on an evanescent media such as sand or dust. Ephemeral writing is not found in communications, but this does not mean it must be considered as useless writing, since, all interpersonal relationships excluded, it comes under reflection, an introverted act that seeks the reorganisation of thought.

In tactile writing, like that done by the finger on the palm of the hand, which serves to seal a deal without others noticing, or during the courtship of Tuareg couples (“ahal”) where they exchange love notes, you find the desire for privacy, for secrecy.

At times the sacrality comes with the prized liquid that drives the word, like writing in gold, silver or purple. The purple ink, known as “Kinábaris” in Greek and “Cenobrium” in Latin, which is made with purpura, the colouring obtained from the fermentation and oxidation of the secretions from certain molluscs (Murex), and subsequently using mineral pigments, was used in valuable manuscripts (codices) where the word of God is engraved, and it was usual to stain the parchment red in order to write with diluted gold or silver (“chrysography”). The use of the Purple Sacrum Encaustum regulated by the Codex Iustinianus I, XXIII, 6 was limited to the highest power on Earth, the Emperor, and any others who used it were sentenced to death. Further away from the West, gold and silver writing was also reserved in the Tibetan tradition for their most sacred texts, for which the paper treated in advance with an infusion of lapis lazuli powder turned a shade of blue.

All in all, this is a book for those who enjoy a multicultural trip through the geography of writing and its symbolism.



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Mariluz.puente@uab.cat