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Forum Antike

Online



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Half of a dialogue.

Retracing the nontextual components in late antique letters

The ancient letter is traditionally conceived as a written conversation between two individuals. Of this epistolary dialogue, only some lines are usually preserved, since half of the correspondence is generally lost. But is this the only missing element? While the delivery of administrative correspondence was provided by an official postal service in Roman and late antique times, common citizens needed to find other ways to deliver their letters, by entrusting them to someone who happened to be heading in the right direction. The letter carrier, when trusted, was often charged with some oral information, now necessarily gone. Evidences of this practice can be found in papyri, as well as in literary epistolary collections. In the latter, the messenger is occasionally designated by the expression ἔμψυχος ἐπιστολή, “living letter”, in opposition to ἄψυχος ἐπιστολή, the “lifeless letter”. This practice suggests that the person in charge to transmit the main message gradually took over the informative use of the written letter. By questioning the classical conception of the letter as a written document, this paper aims to discuss the performative nature of the letter in Late Antiquity, as well as its function when its primary aim – the informative purpose – is transferred to the third character of the dialogue, the messenger.