

RESPONSE FOR THE FIRST SESSION: ORIGINS, FUNCTIONS, ADAPTATION, SURVIVAL

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John Kelley's deflation of "the core thesis of Jack Goody's anthropology of literacy" caught me assenting — if wondering whether the gesture was still necessary — but also a bit defensive, since Goody's ideas were, I believe, important at the time to the study of writing and literacy and they were certainly highly stimulating for me personally. In 1968, the year I left the Oriental Institute, Goody had just edited *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Goody 1968), a collection of essays I encountered first on Miguel Civil's bookshelf a year later when I returned to defend my dissertation. I remember being especially impressed by S. Tambiah's essay in Goody's volume on literacy in a Thai Buddhist village, where some languages could be written as well as read, others could be read and understood but not written, and others still could be read aloud but no longer understood. It revealed whole vistas of possibilities for understanding the multilingual scribal corpora in ancient centers like Hattusas (Gurney 1961: 117–28) and Ugarit (Lackenbacher 2002: 19f.), or imagining the degrees of language competence of late first-millennium temple officials in Babylonia, who used Aramaic and Greek in their everyday lives, while within the temple precinct they copied, recited, and even composed texts in Akkadian and Sumerian cuneiform (Houston, Baines, and Cooper 2003: 450–56).

A decade later, when I began to work more seriously on writing systems and their origins, I read the book more carefully, along with *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Goody 1977). Although I was immediately skeptical that the cognitive effects of writing were as profound as Goody claimed, or that written texts necessarily enabled a critical stance toward tradition, and was especially contemptuous of his overvalorization of alphabets, I was very sympathetic to his emphasis on the power and importance of decontextualization. It seemed especially apt for Mesopotamia, where, from the very beginning of writing, the list was the most powerful tool of intellectual analysis (Veldhuis 2004: chapter 4), and where, for the first half-millennium or so after its invention, writing was otherwise almost entirely restricted to administrative records (Englund 1998 and Glassner 2003) that could have no counterpart in oral discourse. The writing system of these records, I might add, is not just a more developed version of a token system, but something very new and very powerful, nor did it have anything to do with markets, but rather enabled the bureaucracy of the nascent state to more efficiently coerce and control production and redistribution.

Seduced by how well Goody's functions of storage and decontextualization seemed to both explain and account for early writing in Babylonia, I rather too hubristically assumed that they should explain early writing in general. Because *our* earliest writing was done on durable surfaces, we cuneiformists have a privileged window onto the emergence of writing. Writing in Babylonia emerged as an administrative technology: you can have religion and ritual without writing, you can have royal display without writing, but you cannot (easily) run a large-scale complex society without writing, or rather, the difficulties you encounter in doing so will usually, sooner or later, lead to writing's invention. Since all so-called pristine writing systems appear in complex

societies — Babylonia, Egypt, China, Mesoamerica — it was easy to imagine that writing arose everywhere to meet administrative needs, but that the everyday administrative records that would have been written on papyrus, wood strips, cloth, or bark paper did not survive. What survived was commemorative, laboriously carved onto stone palettes or mace-heads or stelae, or incised into shell and bone; and commemoration, as we know from the Babylonian example, was not the use for which writing was invented, but a use to which it was later put (Cooper 2004).

I have learned, much too late, alas, from John Kelly that if I had read my Weber, I would have realized that comparatist forays need not lead to positing “universal tendencies” or “a general theory of writing’s” origins. I have belatedly come to accept that commemoration may well be at least one of the original stimuli for early Egyptian writing (Baines 2004) and that the murky origins of Mesoamerican scripts may have more to do with calendrical complexities and identity than accounting (Houston 2004), even as I remain certain that Chinese writing was *not* devised for the purpose of divination or communication with the ancestors (Bagley 2004). And, after reading Kelly’s paper, I think I have finally made my peace with the Indian anomaly, that ferocious fidelity to an orally transmitted tradition whose textual accuracy defies what would seem possible without the technology of writing.

Kelly describes two very different traditions of literacy, one focused on oral language and only loosely connected to the state and another firmly based on written language that becomes the basis and means of state control. My own knowledge of South and East Asian history is too poor to judge if Kelly is not drawing too stark a contrast. Was royal patronage and dissemination of Sanskrit learning insignificant? Why was state-bound Chinese learning so attractive beyond the borders of the Chinese state, in Korea and Japan and parts of Southeast Asia? In any case, cuneiform learning in ancient Western Asia exhibits broad similarities to both the Sanskrit and Chinese models, but unlike Sanskrit, neither Sumerian nor Akkadian was the language of the gods and unlike Chinese characters, cuneiform signs had no cosmological origin (Vanstiphout 1989). The Mesopotamian gods wrote through a multiplicity of phenomena large and small with the entire universe as a writing surface, in a language whose decoding was determined by precise rules embodied in the scores of thousands of lines in cuneiform divinatory treatises (Rochberg 2004).

On the one hand, writing and literacy in Mesopotamia were born in the service of the state, and the state both supported and sought to control the educational system that produced its officials and bureaucrats, as well as the scholars who enabled the king to know the will of the gods and constructed the ideologies that underpinned the state (Michalowski 1991; Cooper 1993; and Pongratz-Leisten 1999). Piotr Michalowski (1991) describes the Babylonian King Shulgi (ca. 2050 B.C.) in much the same way as Kelly describes the Qin emperor, destroying large portions of an earlier text corpus, and emperor Wu, having texts copied and corrected and collected sounds very much like a latter-day version of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (668–630 B.C.; Finke 2004).

On the other hand, cuneiform literacy and scholarship traveled far beyond the reach of Babylonian armies. It arrived at Ebla around 2450 B.C., long before Ebla was conquered by the Babylonian rulers Sargon (ca. 2325 B.C.) and Naramsin (ca. 2250 B.C.), and flourished in many areas on the periphery of Mesopotamia that enjoyed complete independence from the center (Cooper 1992). Yet, an “‘army’ of priests and scholars” managed to keep the usage of the periphery current, more or less, with the usage of the center. Strange as it may first seem, it is during the period of maximum Mesopotamian domination of the periphery, in the first half of the first millennium, that we find cuneiform in full retreat, gone almost entirely from the western periphery apart from official Assyrian usage, and in the process of being replaced by alphabetic

Aramaic writing in the heartland as well. During its heyday, however, cuneiform operated in Western Asia as a hegemonic writing system via networks of scholars that could be co-opted by the state but existed very well, too, in the absence of a unifying state (Cooper 1999). The writing system that had originated as an accounting technology, on the bean-counting margins of Uruk culture, had become the vehicle of culture out there on the margins.

But Gonzalo Rubio's paper demonstrates that the situation was really not so simple. We may read and understand letters from Mari, Tuttul, Emar, or Alalakh as the Akkadian texts they are, but we are very aware that they may have been dictated and read out in local languages that would have been very different from the Akkadian in which they were written down, a possibility which becomes more certain as we move into the southern Levant, very far from the center. This alloglottography is difficult to detect because for most of the second millennium, speakers of other Semitic languages used Akkadian cuneiform when they needed to write (Cooper 1999), and their competence in Akkadian was quite acceptable. But the earlier alloglottography that Rubio discusses, the first attempts to use Sumerian cuneiform to write Semitic languages, is very different. Even when there are no phonetic Semitic elements whatsoever in a text, there are telltale syntactic, lexical, or grammatical clues which indicate that these texts were not intended to be read in Sumerian (although how they ever were read in Semitic is beyond me). But, most often, there are, scattered sparsely throughout a text, a phonetic pronominal suffix here, a conjunction or preposition there, indicating that the text surely was intended to be read in Semitic. This may, in Rubio's terms, be only "partial alloglottography," but it is just this partial quality that makes working with those texts so very difficult.

It is true, as Rubio tells us, that the use of Sumerograms in Akkadian texts of all periods is also a kind of partial alloglottography, but the persistence of Sumerograms in Akkadian, while certainly demonstrating the strength of tradition in scribal practice, is not scribal antiquarianism, which I would rather identify with the revival of older forms: the use of archaizing script, orthography, or linguistic features (e.g., Schaudig 2001: 56f., 86f.). The high frequency of Sumerograms in certain kinds of first-millennium texts, in fact, is the opposite of antiquarian. Rather, it represents the "modern development" of a very efficient style of technical writing that betrays no antiquarian yearnings (Cooper 1996: 52f.).

Eventually, of course, the entire cuneiform scribal enterprise became a kind of antiquarian pursuit, although much more than antiquarianism must have been at work for Sumerian and Akkadian to survive for 600 or more years after Cyrus conquered Babylon, as languages with neither army nor mother-tongue community, using script and media that were hardly competitive with the state-of-the-art writing systems of their time. The final centuries of cuneiform see it gradually restricted to fewer and fewer areas of use in Babylonian temple communities — surely, Rubio's evocation of "the melancholy of dispersion and loss, withering and decadence," is apt here for us if not for them (Houston, Baines, and Cooper 2003).

The very latest cuneiform texts concern astronomy and astrology, the stereotypical Chaldean disciplines — practiced by an ever smaller circle of adepts (Brown n.d.). So, too, in Egypt, although literacy in the ancient Egyptian language and writing systems survived several centuries longer than cuneiform literacy in Babylonia, "By ... the second and third century C.E.," according to Jacco Dieleman, "Demotic was merely used by a small circle of native priests for literary and religious compositions." But if Greek provided strong competition for the native Egyptian language, a strong Egyptian mother-tongue community must have, at least in the realm of spoken language, resisted Hellenization, for how else does one explain the emergence of Coptic Christian literature in late antiquity. Whereas cuneiform scribes were preserving languages that had virtually nothing to do with what anyone spoke in Babylonia, Egyptian in the form of Coptic was

still spoken in Egypt in the middle ages and remains in use as a liturgical language in the Coptic Church today.

It seems fitting that a variety of languages, scripts, and signs would be used in magical spells, where the efficacy of language often lies not in its clarity but in the power possessed by certain names and sounds and designs. And although anyone literate in Demotic might have been able to read hieratic, Greek, and Old Coptic, the use of the so-called cipher script, even if easily deciphered, can only have been intended to restrict further the already highly restricted readership, a writing for those on the margins of the already marginalized. The question remains why a "magical library" in which the great majority of manuscripts would have been completely accessible to a literate practitioner would also contain a small number of manuscripts with similar contents that seem to have been intended for a tiny minority of readers.

Markets, perhaps? If amulets with multi-scripted Demotic texts were especially prized, if, in fact, the sale of magical inscriptions constituted an important stream of income for late Egyptian priest-scribes literate in Demotic, then restricting access to these handbooks would be a necessary economic strategy. David Brown (n.d.) has recently suggested that the last couple of generations of cuneiform scribes in Babylonia probably survived by selling horoscopes. Markets, then, may have proved the last refuge of the most ancient writing systems of the Near East, centuries after states had abandoned them for alphabetic writing in newer languages.

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