Networks of Early Writing

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The cultural innovation of writing emerged independently or via stimulus diffusion in several hearths including Upper Egypt, Mesopotamia, China's Yellow River valley, and Mesoamerica. Writing served some of its earliest users as a means to coordinate flows of goods and record material transactions and as a technique for extending control over people, space and territory. At the same time, writing had close associations with metaphysical practices such as divination, prayer, magic and astrology. Pragmatic applications of writing certainly dominated in certain places and times. In regard to the preserved corpus of Linear B, for example, we have "no surviving trace of [this] writing used for anything but bureaucratic purposes."[1] Likewise early cuneiform dealt mainly with commodities and material goods, keeping track of taxation and tribute involving textiles, ingots, livestock, and various foods.[2] A less pragmatic power of the word is suggested by hieroglyphs inscribed on the inside of Egyptian tombs to guide people's spirits to the realm of the gods or Chinese characters used in divination. What is shared among all of these practices is the circulation of a general power I will call "kingship."

The question at hand is how the transformation of the word from a fleeting performance to a durable and portable object allied the new techniques of writing with networks of power which were at once "practical" and "magical." Regardless of whether the symbols stood for phonemes, syllables, morphemes or entire words, and whether the "page" on which they were written was stone, clay, papyrus, wood or bone, the fixing of the word set in motion a wide-reaching process of network-formation that hid behind its own antithesis, the image of a divine or semi-divine personage. To broach this topic is fraught with difficulty because, as Saunders observes, whereas geographical research has flourished in and around questions of textual production and reception, "limited consideration has, so far, been directed to the practice of writing, and more specifically, to its historicized, cultural practice."[3] Our exploration of writing must therefore move "beyond the individual as an impermeable entity and appreciate its relationality with various people and places," and to do so we must treat "kingship" in a way that destabilizes the king as a person while recognizing the new form of authority that emerged in scribally-linked actor-networks.[4]

This paper starts with a discussion of the very general and pervasive sort of power produced by writing. It then situates the emergence of writing in the context of oral society and culture. From here the focus turns to

the question of how to combine actor network theory (ANT) with the study of emotion and affect. These ideas are then applied to questions relating to the surfaces, symbols, and practitioners of early writing. Throughout this discussion "king" will include a variety of authorities based on hereditary inequality under whose image power was centralized, and as such the term includes pharaohs and emperors. "Kingship" indicates networks through which the power was attributed to certain leaders. "Writing" will indicate not just symbols but the networks of technique, practice, and participation surrounding the emergence of fixed speech or semi-permanent words, through what Thrift calls "stuttering technological advance and the construction of all manner of slowly evolving institutions of responsive expression."[5]

Power and networks

This paper adopts an actor-network theory (ANT) approach. If we reject explanations that depend on "society," "social structure," and other concepts suggesting "behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings," then we must adopt a methodology that follows continuous trails, and do so "myopically" rather than imposing too many scholarly translations onto the translations we study.[6] Specifically, we should reject the impulse to place all of the puppet strings of early societies in the hand of a king, emperor or pharaoh just as we reject the impulse to tie the puppet strings of contemporary society to "capital" or "the state."[7]

Kingship circulated as a quasi-object among network participants, functioning to maintain the stability of relations between, for example, stone masons, stones, tool-makers, slaves, soldiers, priests, nobility, crops, farmers, boat-builders, boat pilots, and boats while the fixed or stabilized word functioned as an intermediary, linking rulers and all of these other things. Kingship expressed in disembodied form as a scribally-linked network is a concept without scale because "we should never vacate the local and the micro in order to look for 'explanations' at another scale of analysis; neither should we remain trapped in the local and the micro for the networks will undoubtedly travel far from those restricted realms."[8] Kingship was a precarious achievement, like the aspects of "nature" that Whatmore finds "spun between social actors rather than a manifestation of unitary intent."[9] Kingship involved forms of written communication we would identify as propaganda, myth, and history,[10] and all three of these types of writing continue, in slightly different ways, to support the building of actor-networks.

ANT's "agnosticism" avoids fixing the identities of actors as long as such identities are still undergoing negotiation: "capital" and "labor," "colonizers" and "colonized," "man" and "woman," and "king" and "subject." However, despite this agnosticism power remains a key concern in ANT studies: "a constant debate will rage about who obeys and who is obeyed….[T]here will be as many definitions of 'the whole picture' as there are actors striving to enrol and/or to be enrolled."[11] Actor network theory

"has often been accused of lacking a power perspective," yet Czarniawska and Hernes call this "a truly surprising allegation" because ANT "has been constructed with a view toward revising traditional approaches to power."[12] This is true of approaches to politics in particular where "[p]ublics are constituted not simply as abstract moments of communication, but as part of deeply embedded social and machinic complexes involving the infrastructures that allow for the mobilities of people, objects, and information."[13]

ANT's objective is not to expose hierarchies of power, but a "weak" version of ANT acknowledges that "some agents have far more capacity to direct the course of socionatural relations than do others."[14] A long legacy of geographical writing can assist in employing this approach because most interpretations of ANT retain a "geography of enablement and constraint" or at least a sense that the actor network is a "location where regions intersect with networks."[15] Perhaps the question of power is still excluded by many proponents of ANT because while power is often attributed to the elements in a network, agency is best understood as a property of the network itself. Such a network would perhaps be less ambiguously labeled an "actor's network"[16] or a "networked-actor." We are looking for Foucaultian micro-power or capillary power. As such, it is particularly devious when it disguises itself as a king or some other great man.

The construction of a durable power attributed to a great man (which includes the rare woman like Egypt's Hatshepsut, who assumed the symbols of male authority) permitted organization, interpretation and command to move out from that anchor point through networks that were spatial and temporal, but also based on various translations. Viewing social positions like kingship as quasi objects circulating through various translations and media reveals the agency of humans and nonhumans normally thought to be without power,[17] and it also shows that persons traditionally seen as supremely powerful are in fact the effects of a distributed power.

Writing and orality

If we want to know the meaning of writing at the time of its invention and shortly thereafter, we must consider the cognition, affect, and emotions of primary orality, since that condition still pertained for the majority of society. The context in which the earliest writing was understood was not literate society. It was a society based almost entirely on the spoken word, a society where almost everyone was illiterate—a condition known as "primary orality."[18] Written materials reached the majority of the population in the form of recitation, as most works were memorized and the few written works were read or sung aloud.[19] Orality was the context in which writing was first understood and it was actually a prerequisite of kingship as opposed to later and earlier crystallizations of authority.

Our own understandings of social power, as they draw on aesthetics, politics, and scientific ways of knowing, are all rooted in a literate

worldview. Our senses of meaning and knowledge are also rooted in the divergence between types of literate power. The divisions between art, science, government, and religion emerged with writing and were not present in primary orality. In primary orality the storyteller or bard served as a living repository of the past.[20] Performers and performances were nodes in a network of relations that defined a cyclical time that had not yet given way to the linear time of the account book, almanac, calendar, and clock.[21] Places of performance were involved in constructing the sense of time, as well, because performative re-animations of the past had to take place rather than moving through space like the printed pages or networked signals of today. All of this suggests that under primary orality, the past was not a "foreign country" but a potential energy to be released in the here and now.[22]

Ong refers to groups in primary orality as "verbomotor cultures," suggesting the way in which the body with its gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and various rhythms is part of the medium of oral communication.[23] This embodied language has relatively little in the way of meta-symbolic elements such as geometrical figures, abstract categories, formal logic, definitions, or self-analysis, all of which derive from text-embedded thought.[24] Primary orality also employs a particular type of logic. For example, when people living in one of the last refuges of primary orality were given the following list—hammer, saw, log, hatchet—and asked which item was "different," they kept the log and excluded one of the other items. Their explanation was: "even if we have tools, we still need wood—otherwise we can't build anything."[25] Upon reflection we find that this is a place-based logic. The oral subjects imaginatively put themselves in place with the items they had to consider, and kept things that worked together for place-making rather than mentally transporting the items into an abstract classificatory grid—a place of thought rather than inhabitation.

Primary orality implies a form of thought that is at once concrete and practical, place-based and embodied, yet also in touch with a kind of affect we call "magical." This cognition blurs the lines between what we call "animate" and "inanimate," refusing to draw a line between what is capable of expressing itself and what is capable of being expressed.

> It is difficult for literates to experience anything approaching the intensity and vividness of nature as it presents itself to an indigenous, oral community….The animistic perception of a natural phenomenon (such as a shadow shifting across a boulder) as a meaningful gesture, or entering into conversation with clouds or owls, reflects an inherently synaesthetic, participatory disclosure of the surrounding things and elements not as inert but as expressive entities, power, and potencies. [26]

The blurring of distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, the conscious and the unconscious, the animate and the inanimate, the symbol and the referent are all aspects of what Sack calls a "mythical-magical" concept of space.[27] From the perspective of literate society, this

can be characterized as "the tendency to project emotions onto objects, to animate them, and to view symbolic vehicles as though they possess part of the attributes of their referents."[28] Literate subjects, in contrast, think themselves out of place, employing a habit wherein things must be placed in categorical boxes and all they express is their generic identity.

Writing affected cognition since "cognitive abilities do not reside in 'you' but are distributed throughout the formatted setting, which is not only made of localizers but also of many competence-building propositions, of many small intellectual technologies."[29] From the heart of our literate networks we are struck by the magical quality of primary orality's sense of place, in which non-humans can speak to people.[30] However, perhaps it is only because non-human actants like rocks and animals cannot write that human actants who are enmeshed in networks of literacy no longer hear them speak. So the society supported by early writing is remote from our current, fragmented conceptions of power, presence, authority, and communication, because it was enmeshed in networks characterized by a pervasive orality that would not give way to literacy for thousands of years; this is clear if we remember the limited scope of the uses and users of writing at the time and it determines the meaning of early writing and the translation of kingship through scribally-linked actor-networks.

Power and networks

Actor-networks grow through the interessement of allies. In his famous book chapter Michel Callon showed how three researchers set up their study of scallops as "an obligatory passage point" for scallops, fishermen, and academic colleagues.[31] This meant the scholars offered the question "how do scallops anchor themselves" as a means of overcoming obstacles as diverse as hungry starfish, fishery profit losses, and unsatisfied scientific curiosity, simultaneously addressing scallops, fishermen, and colleagues.[32] If these others could be coaxed to define their interests according to this problematic then their "interessement" around the question and their subsequent enrollment as "allies" would stabilize a network of relations and hold the researchers in their position of (apparent) power. On this account, an ally is whatever acts as a representative of its kind, and confirms a particular problem as "indispensable in the network."[33] In similar terms, we can see kingship as a precarious achievement that depends on enrolling various allies around problems such as territorial gain, regional coordination, and construction of meaning. Kingship is ultimately not about great men but about connections that hold together because of interessement of allies and the circulation of a sense of awe-inspiring greatness ascribed to the king.

As soon as any particular group began to fix words on stone, clay, papyrus, wood, or some other material, speech acts broke free from the here and now, and from the body of the speaker, and formed durable, extensive connections that reworked space and time.[34] H. A. Innis fell prey to

technological determinism when he argued that "alluvial clay as the medium for writing had implications for Sumerian civilization in the difficulties of transport and the tendency to encourage the development of a decentralized society,"[35] but he was somewhat more on target when he maintained that: "the shift from dependence on stone [as a writing surface] to dependence on papyrus and the changes in political and religious institutions imposed an enormous strain on Egyptian civilization."[36] The space-adjusting effects identified with regard to modern media[37] are not restricted to the age of telecommunications or even to the post-Gutenberg world. New media are not objects but actor-networks, and as they rework space and time they consequently affect the organization of social life. Media can either support societal stability through time or societal expansion through space, but the "media" in question must be understood as networks that support communication, not merely the material, technological elements of those networks. "Writing" thus diffused as a general set of relations that enrolled various forms of matter, people, ideas, mobilities, and attitudes into heterogeneous networks that reworked space and time.

Rather than falling into the trap of technological determinism, some other scholars of early civilization seize on the great-man model of history: "The long-term attention paid to the elaboration of divination and magic in Egypt and Mesopotamia is evidence of the importance that the rulers of early civilizations accorded to understanding the supernatural and finding ways to placate or control it."[38] Here the ruler seems to guide and direct an entire civilization, but the rulers that arose at the dawn of civilization were, like later leaders, dependent on networks of literacy and thus were effects rather than causes of the circulation of power. Kingship and the geographical concentration of power were both achieved by and in the networks of early writing and their particular character within primary orality.

Power and affect

Another vital issue is explored by geographical studies of emotion: "how does power feel?" The question of emotion is too important to be neglected even if it complicates the agnosticism of ANT.[39] A scallop may be an ally in a network and therefore we may strive to study it in the same fashion as a fisherman who is also an ally, yet we can never know how the scallop feels about being an ally, whereas we have a moral obligation to ask how the fishermen feels about being an ally. On reflection we may note that power can feel (to give a few examples) maternal, paternal, fraternal, innovative, traditional, felicitous, implacable, malignant, tragic, productive, or destructive. To humans, at least, power may even feel sacred, and as William James indicates emotions of the "sacred" take many forms:

> [T]here is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth….As concrete states of mind, made up of a feeling plus a specific sort of object, religious emotions of course are psychic entities distinguishable from other concrete emotions; but there is no ground for assuming a simple abstract 'religious

emotion' to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection by it-
self, present in every religious experience without exception.[40]

This point needs to be raised because kingship's circulation was asso-
ciated with emotions similar in some measure to the religious emotions
listed by James. Religious affect is essential to enrolment in kingship net-
works but also elusive: "no adequate report of its contents can be given in
words"; and it is also noetic since it consists of "insight into depths of truth
unplumbed by the discursive intellect [but with] a curious sense of au-
thority."[41] One's relation to kingship was felt as a relationship to the king,
and that conflation between participation in an actually powerful network
and veneration for a fictional source of power has much in common with
religious affect.

The sacred is numinous, that is, endowed with a power of a different
order than the powers one ordinarily encounters, compared to which
human potency dwindles and people have "the feeling of…utter 'noth-
ingness', the feeling of being 'no more than a creature'."[42] Awareness of
the distributed agency facilitated by writing was condensed in the living
symbol of the king. Human participants in scribal actor-networks sensed
their enrolment in those networks via inchoate feelings possessing all of
the power traditionally associated with religion and magic, yet linked to
kingship which with the symbol of a person builds something that is much
more than a person.

The self's embeddedness in networks is almost infinite in scope and
variety. Those who recognized this actual embeddedness before the ad-
vent of the symbols of power of both (Abrahamic) God and what Latour
calls the "crossed-out God" performed this recognition in the language of
magic and the performance of ritual.[43] In this sense, magic and ritual were
actually powerful because such forms of affect facilitated the coordination
of actions. Writing mobilized more durable heterogeneous networks,
under the auspices of kingship's numinous affect, even as people's recog-
nition of the power of the new scribal-networks was transferred emotion-
ally onto the king and enacted through various rituals of subservience and
reverence.

Intricacies of written correspondence

The Amarna letters from the fourteenth century BCE provide a fasci-
nating glimpse of this situation. These letters between Egypt and its neigh-
bors are in the form of clay tablets inscribed with Akkadian cuneiform.
Letters to the pharaoh often begin with a greeting like the following: "For
you, your household, your wives, your sons, your country, your chariots,
your horses, and your magnates, may all go very well."[44] Others begin
with a formulaic supplication: "I fall at the feet of my lord, my sun, 7 times
and 7 times"; in the latter case, the sender might refer to himself as: "your
servant, the dirt at your feet."[45] Reaching further back, Mesopotamian let-
ters from the period of the twenty-first and twentieth centuries BCE, we

find correspondence similarly marked with seals such as "O Shulgi, mighty man, king of Ur, king of the four corners of the universe—Ur-Lisi, governor of Umma, is your servant!"[46]

The letters following such greetings seem transparent with regard to the practical motives and attitudes they convey; they requested particular exchanges of reeds, wood, grain, dates, and other commodities. The later inscriptions negotiated long-distance exchanges of food, women, and precious objects, demanded fair treatment of messengers, or requested military assistance. All of these letters appear to confirm a model of power in which kings and other rulers used writing to extend their personal power across territories and dominate subordinates. We might be inclined to attribute the driving force in this communication system to the leaders "who controlled traditions and behavior within the community" and to view religion and ritual embedded in early texts as mundane political tools that "strengthened social order especially in times of upheaval…."[47] Any religious themes incorporated in such writings may seem to be manipulated by a single leader such as Sargon of Akkad in order to realize individual political ambitions.[48] In other words, the "great man" theory of history seemingly leaps out of these and other early written materials.[49]

However, our theory of distributed agency points to a more complicated situation. As Michalowski notes regarding communications attributed to the Governor of Umma: "Although many of the preserved texts include the seals of the governors themselves, it is obvious that this was only a legitimating device and that certain officials had the right to roll the governor's seal on tablets. There is even evidence that there existed multiple copies of these seals."[50] The powerful individual was a quasi-object that circulated through early letters and other early texts. This great-man at the origin of civilization was not a man at all but a type of affect inextricably bound to a type of networked power disguised as a great man. If the man died or was killed the power simply relocated, which stimulated warfare and the victor was thereby marked as the next great man. The networked power of early society was therefore both concealed and stabilized by a single symbolic construct of personalized power.

We must be very careful how we think of writing in this context. On the one hand, the formulaic greetings in these early letters construct the image of one man addressing another man. Everything between falls away--clay, cuneiform, scribes, messengers, envoys, and officials. Trevor Bryce brings these back to life and reveals that even a simple exchange of letters was marked by proliferation.[51] The clay tablet was only one of several including drafts and copies held by the sender. The scribe was not merely a device for encoding and decoding but a living, choice-making human being who translated and paraphrased the texts. What it meant to be a scribe was varied insofar as even this small group of literati (perhaps one or two percent of society) was internally differentiated and included the semi-literate ranks of doctors, ritualists, priests, and political officials as well as young students and key advisors in the kingdom's affairs. Since correspondence required translation not simply from the language of the

sender to the language of the receiver, but often to and from a third, scribal language, the scribes exercised considerable interpretive power. This power translated from speech to hand to clay and had to be translated as well from (say) Hittite to Akkadian, then translated again upon reaching its destination, from clay to eye to speech, and from Akkadian to the Egyptian language. In between lay the bodies of scribes and the bodies of those who traveled with the letters. The letters made reference to these messengers and the Akkadian term for them, *mār šipri*, meant various things: "ranging from mere couriers or deliverymen to distinguished ambassadors, magnates and chief ministers, whose ranks sometimes included members of the king's own family, empowered to negotiate with a foreign ruler on their master's behalf."[52] Their inclusion as part of the correspondence added to the meaning of the written words, like a picture relates to a caption. In short, the "king" or "pharaoh" referred to in early correspondence was a dispersed throughout the pooled agency of a heterogeneous network of objects, symbols, vehicles, and people.

While early Mesopotamian letters were often written for practical purposes, the same technique was used to write "letter-prayers" to deities by kings, princesses, scribes, and elite members of society. This situation indicates similarity of affect, as well. "All the known Akkadian letters of petition addressed to deities…were written with the same archival hand that was used to write contemporary business letters and documents, not in literary script."[53] The stylistic similarity reveals a continuity between the networks we would categorize as political and religious, with the difference that in the latter case the putative ruler had no body except what people might construct in the way of icons. Actor networks of secular correspondence and actor networks of sacred communications both enrolled participants with a sense of the numinous and called for similar performances of subservient text-making in order to generate powerful actor-networks.

In this initial phase of writing there were quite often disincentives to simplification, standardization and rationalization of writing itself. Egyptian hieroglyphs, cuneiform, Mayan glyphs, and Chinese script were all quite complex systems in which symbols for sounds, concepts and words were interspersed. In some cases, a particular symbol might stand for a sound, a concept, or a word, depending on the context, and reading and writing involved learning one's way around a more complex system that what we normally think of as "writing."[54] The ambiguity and complexity of early writing systems contributed to the arcane, mystical power associated with early writing-performance—a power already constituted by writing's reworking of networks in time and space and by the inchoate awareness that writing permitted the spatial distribution of agency. Such networks filtered out those who were not allies of the problematic of kingship even as they permitted kingship to circulate. In a nutshell, as "kings" circulated they were much more than human, both in the ANT sense of hybridity and in the sense of numinous affect. We now turn to three particular elements of this fused power—the social role of the scribe, the writing surface, and the writing itself.

Scribal authority

In a fascinating history addressing the spatial implications of communication technologies, Ronald Deibert argues that "the reproduction of writing—whatever its ultimate origins—has always been closely associated with a spiritual elite."[55] This association grows out of mutual dependency: "the mysterious power of writing in recording, transmitting, and freezing affirmations and commands soon endows it with an awe-inspiring prestige, and causes it to be fused with the authority of ritual specialists."[56] Because of these associations, connections to the mythical-magical worldview are evident in the association of priests, clerics, learned persons, and scribes with arcane and exclusive bodies of knowledge.

Let us consider the Mesopotamian approach to writing. This was pragmatic at the outset: "The impetus behind [cuneiform's] invention was not a desire to faithfully record language, but to record trade transactions, crop yields, and taxes—to record and preserve information, not language."[57] The information captured on clay by Sumerians of the archaic period included inventories and transactions involving textiles, livestock, metal implements, surveyors' documents, and ration lists.[58] However, what constitutes information evolved and by the reign of Sargon in the twenty-third century BCE, "The basis on which these men [scribes] advised the king stemmed from knowledge of a textual repertoire that included divination, ritual apotropaism, astronomical works, and presumably the observational and predictive methods required by such texts" and evidently "much advice was requested and given."[59] The Mesopotamian world was full of signs by which deities communicated with human beings; lunar eclipses, puddles, diseases, and malformed fetuses could all be read so as to yield forecasts and predictions.[60] Signs were not seen as human creations so much as translations into and out of nature. Expertise in reading signs, translating the translations, cut across the divide between the new human-made (cuneiform) signs and the older "natural" signs. The Mesopotamian scribe's social role indicated a concept of authority associated with knowledge of both types of signs, blurring "the boundaries between what we would call religious and scientific bodies of knowledge."[61]

The colophon that sometimes appeared on cuneiform tablets specified that its information could only be shared with "another one who knows," meaning other members of the scribal class. The formal title of an initiated scribe was *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*. Although the precise meaning of this title is difficult to interpret, the title established authority over realms defined today as record-keeping, scientific observation, political advising, and the interpretation of magical omens. As Berger and Luckman explain in their classic formulation of the social construction of reality: "Every name implies a nomenclature, which in turn implies a designated social location."[62] While we cannot equate the scribe with any contemporary social position, whether it be that of the accountant, political advisor, or astrologer, the route to understanding the scribe's status "is not to negate the

ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil's role as astrologer in favor of a culturally neutral term like 'expert,' but rather to emphasize the interactive relationship between the study of astronomical phenomena, the management of religious life and also, in the Sargonid period, the impact on politics which was effected by these scholars."[63] Insofar as scribes were mobilized within kingship networks, their social status was thereby elevated and linked to the numinous affect of writing as a human performance, which means ironically that it is an authority that is not easy to frame from our thoroughly literate perspective.

For the Maya, those with the ability to write held a similar association with kingship and the numinous. Mesoamerican scribes were apparently treated as members of the nobility and "as in other parts of the ancient world, writing was an exclusive skill, not intended for the common people, and never meant to be easy."[64] The events commemorated in their complex, artistic writing system included royal births, deaths, marriages, and accession to the throne, as well as key religious events such as bloodletting, ceremonial ball games and human sacrifices. The result was "a powerful form of propaganda, literally fixing in stone the lineage of the kings, their great deeds, and the ritually significant dates on which these deeds were supposed to have occurred."[65] As Marcus argues,

> As in the case of the pharaoh, it was only the Mesoamerican ruler's words that were true enough to carve on stone, giving the stone life and making the words eternal. Often the texts were brief, perhaps with a scene added to impress both those who could read and those who could not. Lengthy details were not necessary; the observer was left with an emotional response, his attitude influenced by a message from someone through whom the god had spoken.[66]

But if both authors suggest individual agency of the ruler we must recall that the writing-based network exceeded and unsettled individual authority. Mayan glyphs were believed to originate with the gods, in this case the god Itzamna, also called Ahdzib (He of the Writing), or the monkey gods Hun Batz and Hun Chuen.[67] The link to the suprahuman revealed an intuition regarding the hybrid nature of networked agency. In Mesopotamia writing was attributed at various periods to the god Nabû, Tehmetum (Nabû's consort), the goddess Nidaba and the supreme Sumerian deity, Enlil.[68] In Egypt, writing was attributed to Thoth who, "during the Creation uttered words which were magically transformed into objects of the material world."[69] In China, writing was attributed to either of two mythological figures, Fu Hsi and Ts'ang Chieh.[70] The idea of the scribe as a link between the sacred and the profane can be found in Norse mythology, as well: the myth explaining the origin of runes tells how Odin, the highest god, sacrificed himself on a tree and hung there for nine days until: "downwards I peered;/I took up the runes, screaming I took them,/then I fell back from there."[71] In these quite varied early civilizations we find a surprising consistency in the ascription of divine origins to writing, and a

"profound sense of the existential importance of writing to political power and order, to justice, and to the preservation of human life and to human destiny."[72] Personal agency under the guise of a strong leader or a god was a symbol whereby the distributed agency of the writing-supported network was intuited and given numinous affect.

Writing surface and power

The earliest Chinese writing was carved on what are called "oracle bones." The writing surface was in fact either the lower shell (plastron) of a turtle or the shoulder blade (scapula) of a cow or water buffalo. After being specially prepared, the scapula or plastron was split using heat and the pattern of cracks was "read" according to a divinatory system. An accompanying inscription might be, "In the (next) ten days there will be no disaster"—a positive outcome paired with a negative outcome: "In the (next) ten days there will be a disaster"—each with its own crack. Turtles, heat, and cracks, as well as the ritual specialists who wrote on the shells, all in effect participated in kingship, constituting a hybrid form of decision-making. Oracle bone inscriptions addressed many concerns, including the outcome of an upcoming battle, the sex of an expected child, the meaning of a dream, the cause of an illness, the safety of planned travel, the outlook for a harvest, or the founding of a settlement.[73] Together these created the problematics of a Chinese variety of kingship (emperorship) that enrolled various allies.

By the late Shang period the goal of learning about the future gave way to the goal of affecting the future. Techniques for preparing scapulas and plastrons developed to the point that cracks were steered into particular patterns. This suggests that "oracles" were understood as mechanisms to cause particular future outcomes. The inauspicious outcome was weakened with circumspect wording, as in "there will perhaps be a disaster," which suggests that the words were seen as having magical efficacy by which "the Shang kings and their diviners sought to know *and fix* the future."[74] But the inclusion of the turtle or bovine as a representative of nature on which writing was performed indicates the hybrid power entailed by kingship.

The numinous power of oracle bone pyromancy derived, in large part, from the writing surface. The turtle was an important cosmological symbol for the Chinese since its back was associated with the sky, its legs stood for the four directions, the lower shell was associated with the earth, and the turtle as a whole was associated with the element of water. "If we thus regard Shang oracle bones as models for the cosmos upon which omens were produced by artificially combining the cosmic forces of fire and water, then we can begin to understand how Shang divination operated."[75] The magic, in this case, was under as well as in the writing—a material semiotic that actively enrolled turtles, bovines, fire and scribes as allies in governance.

By the late Shang period the king rather than a diviner interpreted the cracks.[76] Like a judge's verdict, the king's interpretation was an

enunciatory act, a way of causing rather than simply describing. Over time the inscriptions became highly redundant and predictable. The concept of the mantra comes to mind—a simple articulation that is believed to bring about positive outcomes if it is repeated constantly.[77] However if we step back and look at the practice in social context, the magic did have efficacy. "The divinatory inquiries by the king, along with his ritual sacrifices, ceremonies and respect to ancestors, were conceived of as the most powerful form of contact with heaven and the spirits of the other world."[78] The writing on the plastron or scapula legitimized and formalized the relationship between rulers and cosmos thereby involving a bureaucracy within the circuits of power that was both a means and an end in itself.[79] The intended outcome—power over the future—appears to us as a delusion, but divinatory practices contributed to the mobilization of power at a time when the Chinese civilization was emerging, and anticipated that civilization's remarkable longevity. We now turn from the writing surface to the symbols inscribed, painted or drawn on it.

Liminal symbols

The earliest Egyptian writings are primarily inscriptions on ceremonial objects, stelae marking tombs, labels on the goods in tombs, and the seals of kings, queens and officials, all indicating a link to ritual, royal power, and funerary preparations.[80] The burial chambers of kings from Egypt's Old Kingdom bore hieroglyphic food and drink and hieroglyphic incantations to help the deceased overcome obstacles on their way to the kingdom of the dead. Words were written for the dead in order to "effect this magic permanently on their behalf."[81] By the Middle Kingdom, Coffin Texts reflected a widespread belief in the power of words to cross the barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The use of hieroglyphs as a means of assuring safe passage to the afterlife continued with the "Book of the Dead," a collection of spells, instructions, and poems meant again to assist the deceased in their journey to the afterlife. Although symbolically focused on death, such texts played their role among the living as elements of networks of power, again constructing social hierarchy through numinous affect.

The mythical-magical associations of fixed words were present, as well, in the Egyptian belief that symbols themselves have benign or maleficent powers. The pictorial elements (logograms) of Egyptian writing included depictions of dangerous animals such as the scorpion and the horned viper. By the end of the Middle Kingdom such characters began to be drawn in ways that dismembered or mutilated the animals.[82] The viper was cut in half and the scorpion symbol (*selket*) lost its head, thereby "magically reducing the sign, which was potentially animate and dangerous, to impotency."[83] This manipulation of symbols indicates that they were liminal objects piercing the protective barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This liminality could make hieroglyphs either threatening or useful: "It was believed that whatever was inscribed with

writing would be eternally alive; writing converted an inanimate object into an animate one. Writing someone's name meant that that individual would live forever, and writing 'bread' on a stone box placed in pharaoh's tomb meant that the container would always have bread."[84]

We turn now to northwestern Europe, which acquired an alphabet through stimulus diffusion rather than developing it independently.[85]The path of diffusion is controversial and need not concern us here, but the result was the introduction of writing into a set of essentially oral communities. By the commonly accepted account, the term "rune" has etymological ties to Germanic words meaning "secret" or "mystery."[86] The twenty-four rune names included *þurisaz*, *ansuz*, *teiwaz*, and *inguz*, which meant giant, god, Týr (a god), and Ing (a god), respectively. Other rune names included yew and birch, both types of wood that were associated with magical protection and fertility. Runes have sometimes been given an exaggerated association with magic[87] but by all accounts they played some role in magical practices. One key piece of evidence is the account by the Roman historian Tacitus, from 98 CE, telling of how the Germanic people would carve symbols on fruit wood and cast the pieces of wood so they would fall at random, after which the meaning of the pattern would be determined by a priest.[88] In Egil's saga, a woman who is sick has been treated by placing pieces of whalebone inscribed with runes in her bed, yet she is not recovering. When the hero Egil discovers that ten of these were "writ wrongly," he corrects the error and saves the woman:

> Egil then graved runes, and laid them under the bolster of the bed where the woman lay. She seemed as if she waked out of sleep, and said she now felt well, but she was weak. But her father and mother were overjoyed.[89]

Like hieroglyphs, runes were carved on funerary monuments, including the inner surfaces of tombs where they would have been "invisible to mortal eyes."[90]

Fixed words support the idea of a great man in whose name a multitude of things happen. Yet without the fixed words and their particular ability to mobilize power, build networks and make ideas "stick" from present to future, and from past to present, to enrol diverse actors as allies, the "great man" cannot circulate and cause things to happen. This dispersion of power suggests the source of the mythic associations between writing and resurrection, divinity, and benefits to the dead. The magical associations with the writing surface, the scribe and the symbols themselves are all ways to understand the power of the scribal networks, knowledge and affect that are associated with primary orality.

Conclusion

To record the acts of kings in writing was to solidify kingship and early writing is best understood as an actor network through which kingship circulated. Certain persons were made special, as ones-whose-acts-are-

written-down; the acts thus recorded, whether practical or ceremonial, were only apparently kings' acts; they were in fact acts of and by the scribally-linked networks of early civilizations. Early writing was contextualized within oral societies whose participants were themselves enrolled in the majority of their daily projects through verbomotor communication. To enroll the scribe in his sacred role was therefore not simply a matter of interesting him in the perpetuation of kingly specialness, it involved interessement of various actors around royal power as it was problematized in interlocking written and oral networks. At the level of specific manifestations, the clay, the stylus, the stone and chisel, the turtle shell and scratching tool, the stave engraved with runes, were all associated with forms of numinous affect that intuited network power not by the image of a network but as something that made sense in the ontologies of orality: it was concrete (i.e. residing in the person of the king) and yet divine (i.e. linked supernaturally to the gods).

A range of other approaches in geography would prompt us to ask whether kingship caused power to circulate in these scribal networks or, alternatively, the circulation of power in the scribal networks caused kingship to arise as a social formation. This question insists on a causal arrow between two things. However, the "things" in question cannot be neatly separated so to insert the arrow; they are different perspectives on the same thing, or rather, different perspectives on what is not a thing. We alternatively might follow the lead of Kirsch and Mitchell and attempt to interpret all of the material elements in these networks as "dead labor," which would suggest that behind all of this lies an "ossification" of a particular "social intentionality," some form of exploitation preceding capitalism but working in an analogous way.[91] This response presumes that we know where the beginnings and the ends are when we analyze circuits of power. But the very term "circuit" suggests that we are misguided to look for beginnings and the ends. What we trace the circuits to, "in the final analysis," may be nothing more nor less than the entity that wants most fanatically to be the beginning and end of all circuits. This does not sidestep questions of ethics and morality, but it reminds us how contextual ethics are.

Writing literally had supernatural powers when it was new because of its power to enroll allies in new networks with unprecedented temporal and spatial extent. Seen orally (or heard visually[92]) writing as a medium was alive with very real powers far exceeding what was natural at the time, that is, the known and familiar powers. The scribe was not just a literate person, but rather a fulcrum between the worlds of literacy and illiteracy as the fixed word enabled a changed relationship among humans and between humans and nonhumans. Thrift indicates this profound shift:

> But writing functioned mainly in the cognitive domain of imagination—as a means of framing time and space, as a set of mental and manual skills, as the means of producing all manner of new cultural modes, from lists to novels, as a new and fertile means of boosting imaginative capacities….Certainly it produced a quite different attunement to the world: the onset of this

logocentric world has had global effects, producing new kinds
of consciousness, new kinds of social and cultural structures,
and new kinds of spatiality.[93]

Writing was therefore a hybrid and like other hybrids it subsequently be-
came "the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns."[94] We could write
but could no longer sense the shift in the natural that came about as a re-
sult of writing. So writing which originally provided a special conduit to
nature, as captured in the numinous, and a new model of the human, as
captured in the king, later disappeared into the backdrop of ordinary life
and the disenchanted world.[95]

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