The Impact of Writing: Ancient and Modern Views on the Role of Early Writing Systems Within Society and as a Part of 'Civilisation'

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I, Mary Bywater, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis

Abstract

Writing is essential to the way in which we live today, our society would simply not exist without it. Because of this there is often a danger of unconsciously projecting the importance we put on writing onto ancient societies. The aim of my research project is to uncover the way in which the invention of writing was received and originally affected the people living in the regions where it was being used, and how this view fits in with the modern interpretations that have been put forward on the impact of writing and literacy.

In my study I will be using Egypt and Sumer as case studies, as they were the first regions to invent writing. This is important as it means their societies had not been exposed to writing beforehand, so their reaction was not affected by a preconceived idea of the function of writing. I will begin by looking at the modern views on the role of writing, espoused by scholars from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. These modern views often link writing to the idea of 'civilisation', believing that without it a society cannot be called civilised.

The modern views will be contrasted with the ancient views of early writing, both from the perspective of society as a whole, and on a more personal level. By doing so I hope to highlight where modern views of early writing diverge significantly from ancient views, allowing us to reconsider arguments and place them within their proper context.

Contents

Introduction

Overview

Writing is integral to the way in which our society functions. There is virtually no area or social group that does not use writing in some way. Because of this total immersion in writing we make certain judgements and assumptions about it. This means that there is a danger of unconsciously projecting our idea of writing onto ancient societies where it may not be valid. The aim of my research project is to examine the way in which early writing systems in Egypt and Mesopotamia were understood by the people who first used them, and how this view fits in with the modern interpretations that have been put forward on the impact of writing. If these views diverge significantly then we must reconsider the way in which we study early writing in order to be able to truly understand it.

One of the ways in which modern views of writing are manifested is through the belief that the beginning of writing was also the beginning of 'civilisation', which we usually associate with formalised governance, law, art and monumental architecture. However there is evidence that many, if not all, of these things had been achieved long before the invention of writing. In fact it took several hundred years after the invention of writing before its use spread away from purely administrative and ideological arenas and expanded into areas such as literature and letter writing. Therefore we cannot assume that this connection was made by ancient societies.

The field has also been dominated by the long running debate between Egyptologists and ancient Near Eastern scholars over which region saw the invention of writing first. However, because of the nature of archaeology we do not have evidence for the earliest ever writing and we are unlikely ever to find it, so this debate over primacy will almost certainly remain unresolved. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the dating of the evidence we do have from each region is so close that any perceived differences are not actually that meaningful. But, as my research will highlight, even if it were to be proven which region

began writing first, it would be of little significance to the study of writing or either culture. Key questions would still abound about early writing and how or if it has shaped society. I would argue that it is time to put aside this debate and refocus our efforts on other aspects of early writing.

In my study I use Egypt and Mesopotamia as case studies as they were the first regions to invent writing. This is important as it means their societies had not been exposed to writing beforehand, so their reaction was not affected by preconceived ideas of the function of writing. This should enable us to assess the impact of writing on these societies. It is important to study both Egypt and Mesopotamia because the different scripts used in each region give a variety of perspectives of writing. 'Writing' in Egypt and Mesopotamia was not one universal concept but a whole range of different scripts, each of which worked and were used in their own unique ways. Even where a script crosses cultural boundaries we cannot assume that it will be understood as having the same role and impact on both areas. Writing is very much dependent on its cultural setting; it is embedded in the ideology of its locale and cannot be separated from this[1]. It is therefore important that we base our understanding of early writing on the ancient contexts in which it is found.

My study is split into three sections, looking at the modern perspectives of early writing, the view of early writing from within ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the ways in which ancient people may have actually encountered writing. By structuring the study in this way I aim to clearly show the development of the argument in as clear a manner as possible. Each section will begin with a brief introduction explaining the focus and main points to be examined. The conclusions for each can be found with the conclusions of the final chapter of the section.

We will begin with a first section devoted to the modern perspectives of writing. In Chapter One we look at the archaeological, anthropological and psychological theories on the impact of writing within societies. I will then, in Chapter Two, investigate the debates surrounding the birth of writing, both literally in terms of the earliest evidence for writing from both Egypt and Mesopotamia, and metaphorically with the

[1] Street, 1984: 1

decipherment of both scripts in the nineteenth century. This will provide us with the modern context of writing theory, and serve as a base for our examination of the ancient views of writing.

Section B deals with view of writing from within Egypt and Mesopotamia from the perspective of the community as a whole. I will start the discussion of the ancient views in Chapter Three by looking at the gods of writing from Egypt and Mesopotamia. By studying the gods of writing we can begin to understand how ancient people viewed writing, at least in an ideal world, as the gods are creations of humans. In Chapter Four I will investigate the myths in which writing plays a role. These texts are in many ways the closest that the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians came to explicitly stating how they understood writing and what role they thought it played in their society. In Chapter Five I will examine writing in the context of other recording and representational systems used in both Egypt and Mesopotamia in order to understand the contexts within which ancient people could have placed and understood writing. We will consider the different aspects of writing in terms of recording and representation in both Egypt and Mesopotamia in order to gain a fuller understanding of the ancient views on writing.

The final section deals with more personal encounters with writing, from the view of literate and non-literate people. I will examine who was actually using writing, and in what settings people who did not write themselves would have encountered writing. In Chapter Six we will look at different literate groups and the types of literacy they acquired, in order to try and build a picture of the different ways in which writing was viewed and understood in the ancient world. Finally, in Chapter Seven I will consider the places in which non-literate people would have encountered writing. In the ancient world exposure to writing would have been much less common, restricted to specific places and contexts where most people would have rarely encountered it. It is therefore important that we consider in what places writing was found, what kinds of writing were being used, and which groups of people would have experienced it in these places, whether literate or not.

By looking at these different angles I hope to be able to build an understanding of the ancient views on the role of early writing within society. Which can be compared and contrasted with the modern views on the

role of early writing and leads to the identification of discrepancies between the two. By taking these into account we can begin to interpret the evidence for early writing in the social and cultural context of the ancient societies that were using it, rather than the context of modern societies.

What is Writing?

One key issue to consider at the outset is what actually is writing? For most non-specialists this will not be a question they have ever consciously considered. Living in a literate society has given us an innate understanding of what writing is. Yet writing is not one universal concept. There are many writing systems and they each work in different ways. For example, the Latin alphabetic system used in the west is fundamentally different to the syllabic and logographic system used in China, but we still classify both as 'writing'. In order to study writing we need to know exactly what we mean when we use the term, and so we must define it. This is not easy, as there are many definitions of writing and the differences between these definitions can have a major impact on how we use the term. It is also complicated by the fact that we are examining early writing. The writing systems of both Egypt and Mesopotamia are quite different from each other, and the forms that they took in the earliest stages we have evidence for differed to some extent to the later writing systems that were used in both regions. This changing nature of writing creates further challenges as we attempt to define it. Here we will look at some of the definitions that have been put forward in order to determine how we understand the concept of writing for the purpose of this thesis.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'writing' as:

> "The action of one who writes, in various senses; the penning or forming of letters or words; the using of written characters for purposes of record, transmission of ideas, etc.[2]"

This is probably quite close to what most modern people would think of as a valid definition of writing, but for our study it is not very appropriate. It essentially defines writing by stating how we use writing. This may well be suitable for the modern conception of writing, but it does not tell us what writing fundamentally is. For our study we need a definition of writing on its own terms, that can be applied universally to all experiences.

[2] Oxford English Dictionary, 1989: 646

Many scholars have put forward definitions of writing, usually for use in a specific context, namely their own research, but also as a way of understanding writing more generally. Many define writing in relation to spoken language, for example:

> "writing is defined as a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer.[3]"

Or:

> "[writing's] essential service is to objectify speech, to provide language with a material correlative, a set of visible signs[4]"

The problem with definitions such as these is that there is no evidence to suggest that writing was invented in order to record oral communication in either Egypt[5] or Mesopotamia[6]. In fact the relation to spoken language is so unclear for cuneiform that there is a lively debate over what language it was originally invented to write[7]. Early writing was used in specific contexts, for example internal administration, for which there was no need for the system to be capable of fully rendering spoken language. The earliest texts from both Egypt and Mesopotamia reflect this. Hence, for example, the early literary texts found at the Mesopotamian sites of Fara and Abu Salabikh give few grammatical elements[8]. It is only as the scripts develop and begin to be used in more contexts and by more people that they become capable of recording all parts of speech. In fact, it has been argued that cuneiform only became capable of and used for noting all parts of spoken language after Sumerian had died out as a spoken language, leaving the reader unable to fill in the grammatical information themselves[9]. Clearly then we cannot use any definition based on spoken language for our study.

[3] Daniels, 1996: 3
[4] Goody, 1968: 1
[5] Wengrow, 2006: 203
[6] Damerow, 1999: 6
[7] See: Rubio, 1999
[8] Postgate, 1992: 64
[9] Glassner, 2003: 217; Larsen 1989: 130

Those who argue that writing must by definition be capable of recording speech, have introduced a term to describe these early systems that cannot do so: 'proto-writing'. Peter Damerow argues that writing systems with "weak connections to oral language" should be classed as proto-writing rather than writing[10]. This is not to suggest that proto-writing is in some way inferior; it is simply more dependent on the reader being aware of the context of the document, and having the ability to fill in the missing information. This is similar to the way in which oral communication works[11]. The term 'proto-writing' is used by some ancient Near Eastern scholars, such as Robert Englund, to describe the Uruk IV and Uruk III texts because of the on-going debate over the language which they are meant to represent. Here, the term is used to replace the earlier and controversial term 'proto-Sumerian'[12]. The idea of proto-writing has only in recent times begun to be discussed for Egypt, where the same problem of writing being incapable of fully rendering spoken language exists: it is not until four or five centuries after its first appearance that writing in Egypt was able to do so[13].

Other scholars, such as Jean-Jacques Glassner, argue against the term proto-writing. Writing is writing, he contends, it is not possible to have 'almost writing'. Anything that we may want to classify as such can only be seen as a failed attempt at writing[14]. I would agree with the view that a system is either writing or not writing, although I do not agree with the idea that what is usually classed as proto-writing are failed attempts at writing. Ultimately the concept of 'proto-writing' is only necessary because the definition of writing that has led to it is flawed. If writing is capable of recording speech then any system that is not capable of this cannot be writing. However, I would argue that by using terms such as proto-writing we are complicating the situation unnecessarily. Instead of using the term proto-writing I instead suggest we reconsider our definition of writing so that it is independent of spoken language.

In fact many scholars, such as David Olson, have argued against the idea that writing is, and always has been, simply a way of recording speech. The idea that writing is a way of transcribing speech takes the

[10] Damerow, 1999: 2; 2012: 158
[11] Damerow, 1992: 2
[12] Englund, 1994: 11
[13] Baines, 2008: 842
[14] Glassner, 2003: 215

current dominant (western) writing system, for which this is correct, and assumes that this was always the goal[15]. This is just one of the ways in which modern views of writing are used to interpret ancient views of writing. It fundamentally misunderstands the reasons for its invention, which seem to have been primarily concerned with accounting or ideological reasons. It also underpins the powerful but inherently flawed idea of the evolution of writing systems towards alphabets, as alphabets are seen as the best systems for transcribing speech[16]. Thus not only are definitions of writing based on speech inappropriate in the context of early writing, but by removing this connection we gain a better understanding of what writing fundamentally is.

It is entirely possible to remove writing from the context of recording spoken language. Ignace Gelb, in his landmark book *A Study of Writing*, defines writing as:

> "a system of human intercommunications by mean of conventional visible marks[17]"

Although much of his work is now rather out of date, by attempting to define writing on its own terms rather than through its links to spoken language, Gelb has come much closer to a definition of writing that we can use for this study. The key issue about Gelb's definition is that the system must be conventional, the signs must be understood in the same way by all users and not need the intervention of the 'writer' to interpret the message. This rules out things such as cave paintings, in which the creator may use conventional signs but does not necessarily follow rules that are understood in the same way by all people. In these circumstances the only way to truly understand the message is for the creator to explain it, it is the difference between 'reading' and 'describing'[18]. Gelb's definition of writing is the one which I will follow in this study as it can be profitably applied to both Egyptian and Mesopotamian writing throughout their different manifestations.

Finally, a note on the different types of writing systems. We use an alphabetic system, where each sign represents a phoneme, the basic unit of sound. There are several other types of writing systems that we will be looking at in this study. In syllaberies each sign represents a syllable; this is not the same as an alphabet

[15] Olson, 1996: 85
[16] Olson, 1996: 84
[17] Gelb, 1962: 12
[18] Olson, 1996: 87

as each syllable can be broken down into smaller discrete phonetic units. In logographic or pictographic systems each sign represents a whole word or idea. These systems do not necessarily have to be entirely independent of each other, and mixed systems are common both in Egypt and Mesopotamia. It has also been argued, by Peter Daniels, that there are other types of writing systems, which he calls abjads and abugidas[19]. However, these type of systems are not represented in the ancient societies that we are studying here. The writing systems that we will be considering, cuneiform, hieroglyphs and hieratic, are syllabic systems which include a varying number of logograms.

Some Conventions

The following is supposed to offer guidance about the geographical and chronological context of this study, as well as explain the dating conventions and sign corpora used. More detail is given in the study where appropriate.

Geography

The geographical area that I refer to as Egypt corresponds more or less to the modern Egyptian state with some areas of northern Sudan. Upper Egypt is the area of the Nile Valley south of Cairo, Lower Egypt is the Nile Delta. The ancient Near East is made up of several different cultural regions. The most important for area this study is southern Mesopotamia, which roughly corresponds to the southern part of the modern state of Iraq. This region is usually, if anachronistically, called Babylonia, a term that was not used locally but is a later Greek designation. The southern part of this region was known as Sumer and the northern as Akkad. Northern Iraq corresponds to ancient Assyria. Some evidence used in this study comes from the regions of modern day Syria and Turkey and is contextualised as far as it is necessary for our purposes.

Time Frame

The period examined in this study is long. It stretches from before the invention of writing c.3300BC, and mainly considers evidence up until the end of the Old Babylonian period in Mesopotamia (c.1600BC) and

[19] Daniels, 2009: 35

the end of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt (c.1760BC). However, evidence from later periods is also considered where relevant. Ideally the period examined would have been much shorter and remained closer to the invention of writing, but the limited amount of evidence from both regions has necessitated a wider scope. Throughout this study I will specify to which period evidence belongs. It must not be assumed that all of the evidence reflects views valid in all periods.

Chronology

For ancient Near Eastern chronology I have followed the conventional dates as used by A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East, c.3000-330BC* (London, 1995). For Egyptian dynastic chronology I have followed E. Hornung, R. Krauss, & D.A. Warburton, *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, (Leiden, 2006). Egyptian Pre-Dynastic chronology is problematic; radio-carbon dating for this period must be treated cautiously because the calibration curves for the fourth millennium have major fluctuations that lead to long data ranges[20]. This has led to much debate over precise dating, and many scholars choose to use the relative chronology of periods, e.g. Naqada I, Naqada II etc., rather than absolute dates. With this in mind I have followed the table in J. A. Hill, *Cylinder Seal Glyptics in Predynastic Egypt and Neighbouring Regions* (Oxford, 2004: 17), which uses a wide range of sources to date Predynastic sites in upper Egypt and link these to the relative chronologies of other areas. This is so that it is easier to relate the evidence from Egypt to that of Mesopotamia, but it must be noted that these dates are not accepted by all scholars of ancient Egypt.

Sign Corpora and Definitions

When referring to specific hieroglyphic signs I have followed the reference system used in A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs, revised 3rd edition* (Oxford, 1957). Definitions of hieroglyphic signs and words follow R. O. Faulkner *A Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1962). For cuneiform sign forms and definitions of Sumerian words I have followed the online Pennsylvanian Sumerian Dictionary (http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html).

[20] Hendrickx, 2006: 90

Section A: The Modern Perspective of Early Writing

Section A examines the modern perspectives of early writing. This is an area that has been studied by many different disciplines and in many different ways. In Chapter One we will look at some of the main theories put forward about early writing in general. These concern ideas about where writing came from, what it was originally for, and what it has done to society. Not all of these theories are specifically related to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia by their proponents, but I have attempted to show how they may be understood in light of both these regions.

Chapter Two looks more specifically at Egypt and Mesopotamia as the regions where writing was first used. It particularly focuses on the idea of primacy, both in terms of the modern decipherers of hieroglyphs and cuneiform, and in terms of which region began to write first. I feel it is important that we study these areas as these debates over primacy have, up until now, been the focus of much of the work on early writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia. As we will see, both in Chapter Two and throughout the study, I argue that this debate has very little merit. There is no real chance of ever definitively settling it, and even if it were somehow settled it would contribute little or nothing to our understanding of early writing. Instead, I argue, we need to both broaden our focus to questions such as how and why writing was invented, and narrow our focus to examine these ideas within each society. As I will show throughout the study, writing is not one thing that can always be understood in the same way, instead it is very much related to the cultural context within which it is created and used. This is one of the reasons that I believe it is so important for us to try to understand the ancient views on early writing and how they may differ to modern views.

Chapter 1 – Writing as Civilisation

Writing plays a crucial role in our society and culture. Without writing we would live in a radically different world. Because of this a lot of time and effort has been dedicated by scholars to the study of writing and its effects on society. This has taken place across many disciplines but particularly history, archaeology, anthropology and linguistics. Much of this work has presupposed a link between writing and what we term 'civilisation', a form of complex society that is often associated with features such as social hierarchies, formal governance, art and monumental architecture. As an introduction to the subject we will look at the main modern theories on the origins of writing. We will then examine the presumed effects of literacy on thought processes. This will enable us to begin building a picture of the modern views of the role of early writing, something that we will expand on in Chapter Two when we examine some of the debates surrounding the origins of writing. With this in place we will be able to study the ancient views on the role of early writing, and how these relate to modern perceptions.

Modern Interpretations of the Origins of Writing

Almost since writing was first used stories and theories have existed as to how and why it came to be. As we will see in Chapter Four these explanations are found in the myths of the first literate societies. In the medieval and early modern period in western Europe the Bible was used to prove it was the Christian God who invented writing and passed it on to man. In more modern times theories as to why writing was first invented have been developed using a wide range of approaches, particularly anthropological theories and archaeological data. In this first section we will look at some of the main theories in detail to gain an understanding of the ways in which scholars have looked at the origins of writing.

Writing as Divine Gift

In most periods of the past asking how and why writing came to be invented would have seemed an almost ridiculous question. Many people would not have understood it; there was writing, why did it have to come from anywhere? However, for those that did consider the question the most common conclusion was that it

came from the gods. Of course this was not the only explanation, as we will see, but it was a very popular one and was not just an opinion held by members of ancient societies.

The well-known author Daniel Defoe, published *An Essay upon Literature or An Enquiry into the Antiquity and Original of Letters* in 1726[21] in which he laid out his theory on the origins of writing. In it he argues that the first ever writing was described in the Bible and is found when God writes the ten commandments onto the stone tablets on Mount Sinai[22]. This is the earliest point at which writing is mentioned in the Old Testament. Defoe was not the only person to espouse this view. As he points out himself, St Augustine of Hippo had already put forward this hypothesis in his work *De Civitate Dei* (Book 18, chapter 39)[23], but Defoe expands on it in a way that had not been done previously. He argues that through the Ten Commandments Moses, and thus the Israelites, learnt how to read and write. They then passed on the technology to their neighbours, the Canaanites or Phoenicians in the north, and the Egyptians in the south[24], and from there it spread throughout the rest of the world.

Defoe reasons that if Moses or others were able to write before this time, then Moses would not have had to take two new stones up Mount Sinai to have them re-inscribed by God after he broke the original two. Instead he could have written them out again himself[25]. He also argues that if writing had been invented before this then we would have written records from the antediluvian world[26], but we do not. Thus everything that happened before Moses must have been passed on orally, via Noah and his sons, until Moses learnt to write and was able to record the events.

This theory rests on a literal reading of the Old Testament, and is found in other scholarly works that were highly regarded at the time. For example Defoe used the chronology created by James Ussher in the 1650s as the basis for his dating and calculations. This chronology is based on a literal reading of the Old Testament and dates the creation of the world to 4004BC. Thus Defoe is able to disregard the Japanese and

[21] Used here: *An Essay on the Original of Literature*, (Baltimore, 2007)
[22] Defoe, 2007: 2
[23] Defoe, 2007: 24
[24] Defoe, 2007: 16
[25] Defoe, 2007: 2
[26] Defoe, 2007: 11

Chinese claims to have invented writing because they believed the world to be 11,000 years old, proving their historical knowledge was flawed[27]. He also uses ancient myths and classical authors to support his theory. For example in the *Phaedrus* Plato claims that writing was invented in Egypt by Theutch (Thoth). Eusebius argues that Thoth was Mercury and Mercury was Moses, which proves that Moses was the first to write, having been taught by God[28].

At the time Defoe was writing these were the best available sources. Very few people, in Europe at least, would have doubted that the Bible told the literal truth about the origins and early history of the world and so it was seen as the perfect source for uncovering information about ancient history. Classical authors and early church fathers, such as Plato and Eusebius, would have also been seen as entirely valid works on which to base a theory. The early church fathers could be trusted because they were respected scholars whose works were part of the foundations of the Christian religion and thus beyond reproach. As an ancient Greek Plato would have been thought to be close enough in both time and space to the ancient Egyptians to have learnt the truth directly from them. The Egyptians themselves were believed by the ancient Greeks, and thus most Europeans of Defoe's time, to be the oldest civilisation in existence. Because of this claim to primacy it was often believed that the Egyptians were somehow closer to an original knowledge, or even divine truth, and so knew things that others did not. For example, during the Renaissance it was argued that the story of the resurrection of Osiris reflected the resurrection of Jesus, and was merely an imperfect antecedent to the event[29]. This could have been particularly true of writing if Defoe's theory were correct as the Egyptians would have been the second race to learn writing, directly from the Israelites themselves. Thus it could be believed that the Egyptians would have preserved a true memory of the origins of writing.

For Defoe and his audience all of these pieces of evidence would have been seen as incontrovertible proof that backed up what to them was already clear from the Bible. Of course, very few scholars would accept this explanation now but it is an interesting reflection of many of the stories about the origins of writing found in ancient Egypt and Sumer. As we will see in Chapter Four these often confer the honour of

[27] Defoe, 2007: 9
[28] Defoe, 2007: 25
[29] Iversen, 1961: 62

inventing writing upon a god, and it is only very recently in the history of the study of writing that other ideas have been put forward.

Writing as Civilisation

Many scholars have linked the beginning of a writing system within a society to the start of what is termed 'civilisation' within that same society. Before we can discuss this topic, however, we must first look at what is meant by the term 'civilisation'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines civilisation as:

> "[A] civilized condition or state; a developed or advanced state of human society; a particular stage or a particular type of this.[30]"

This shows just how subjective the interpretation of 'civilisation' can be. It merely refers to a society that is felt to be at a particular advanced state of development; this could mean almost anything. Some of the characteristics usually attributed to a civilised society include formal governance and laws, social hierarchies, monumental art and architecture, and farming of domesticated plants and animals, though the definition changes from scholar to scholar.

Making this link between writing and civilisation has been prevalent in our society for a long time. In *The Most Ancient East*, first published in 1928, the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe states that:

> "writing is used by sociologists as a convenient criterion to distinguish civilisation from barbarism. So we can assert that in Mesopotamia civilisation was created in the Uruk period[31]".

In this particular book he does not debate the issue, he merely asserts it as fact. This gives us an indication of how prevalent the idea was in the early 20th century; Childe was a well-respected scholar and much of his work is still influential today. He was usually very thorough when exploring and examining his theories, so simply stating that this is a fact and moving on suggests that this was so widely believed as to be beyond doubt. It was not until Childe developed his ideas on the 'Urban Revolution', first discussed in his 1936 work *Man Makes Himself*, that we see his reasons for accepting this theory.

[30] OED volume III, 1989: 257
[31] Childe, 1952a: 128

The ‘Urban Revolution’ was a term coined by Childe to explain the societal and cultural shift from living in small sedentary communities to living in cities. He based his ideas on the 19th century ethnographical theory that societies can be grouped into three categories, each developing from the previous one. The 'lowest' form of society is termed “savagery”, and is characterised by nomadic hunter-gatherers. The next stage is “barbarism”, small scale farming supplemented with hunting and gathering. Finally man reaches the level of “civilisation”; this transition, Childe states, is difficult to define. He explains that archaeologists use the appearance of writing to distinguish a “civilised” society from a “barbaric” society. As we saw from the quote above he thinks this reasonable, but he wishes to establish a more detailed model for making the distinction. Etymologically and systematically, Childe finds “civilisation” to be linked to the idea of cities. However, as the term ‘city’ is ambiguous[32] Childe needs to propose a definition. His criteria for distinguishing cities from other kinds of settlements in the archaeological record are the same criteria that in his opinion define civilisation, as he sees these two concepts as inextricably linked.

Although many of Childe's criteria for cities are connected, we will here focus only on the strand that leads to the inclusion of writing in his list. He based this idea on the understanding that full-time specialist craftsmen are only a feature of a society if farmers are able to produce a food surplus that is capable of feeding these specialists. Without this surplus the specialists are only able to carry out their particular skill either on a part-time basis, farming or hunting as well[33], or as itinerant workers moving between communities, each of which will be able to support them for a short time[34]. However, in order to manage a food surplus that could support full-time sedentary specialists some kind of administration must be put into place to exact, record and distribute it. This calls for a recording system that is understood by all administrators and any that may succeed them. Childe assumes that this recording system is always writing and this is how it is created[35].

Of course Childe's definition of writing can be criticised, as can whether an administrative system that

[32] Childe, 1950: 3
[33] Childe, 1950: 6
[34] Childe, 1950: 7
[35] Childe, 1950: 14

records information is truly necessary rather than merely helpful. However, the idea that writing was invented in an administrative context is a popular one, at least for Mesopotamia. As we will see in Chapter Two this is at least partly due to the types of text that were first written in that region, as they do seem to be mainly be administrative.

The link between writing and cities has remained popular with many more modern scholars, such as Hans Nissen, an Assyriologist who worked at Uruk and was amongst the scholars who published the earliest known writing from the site:

> "Writing appears merely as a by-product along the course of rapid development towards a complex life in towns and cities[36]"

Again, this may well be owing to the archaeological context in which the earliest writing has been found, namely in cities. It also makes a logical sense for other reasons, for example if writing developed as a system of record keeping then it is unlikely to have happened in a farm or small village as there would not have been much that needed recording. This would have meant memory or a much simpler recording system could have been used, removing the impetus to develop a complex system like writing.

The link between writing and civilisation was also put forward by the philologist Ignace J. Gelb in his work *A Study of Writing,* one of the first systematic studies of writing systems:

> "Writing exists only in a civilisation and a civilisation cannot exist without writing[37]"

As the first real work in the field of grammatology, the application of linguistic theory to written language, Gelb's theories had a major influence on the way in which scripts were studied for several decades. Despite his statement that he wished it to be the starting point of the debate rather than the foundation, his theories were for a long time simply accepted. Gelb argued for an evolution of writing systems, from logographic scripts, to syllabic scripts and then finally alphabets, each stage developing out of and improving upon the preceding one. He did not believe it was possible for a society to move backwards in this scheme, say from a syllabic to a logographic system[38], and thought that alphabets were the best and most rational type of

[36] Nissen, 1985: 360
[37] Gelb, 1962: 222
[38] Gelb, 1962: 201

script.

Gelb developed his theory on the link between writing and civilisation by explaining the things he considered to be dependent on writing:

> "Writing appears simultaneously alongside all other aspects of "civilisation" - government, art, commerce, industry, metallurgy, long-distance travel, agriculture, domestication of animals[39]"

However it can be shown that at least some of the things Gelb claims 'appear' at the same time as writing existed long before. Agriculture started c.12,000BC in the fertile crescent, and was soon followed by the domestication of animals[40]. If we take the origin of writing as being c.3500-3000BC (see Chapter Two) then farming of both plants and animals began c.9,000 years before. Long distance trade of several different commodities has also been demonstrated. Obsidian has been found in southern Mesopotamian sites dating as early as c.7,000BC[41]. Chemical analysis of this obsidian has shown that it originates from several sites in eastern Turkey[42]. Ubaid period pottery, c.4500-4000BC, has been found in the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and clay analysis has confirmed that it was made in southern Mesopotamia[43]. This long distance trade suggests that both commerce and long-distance travel were not only possible but happened long before writing was invented. This is also trade in finished goods, such as beads and pottery, suggesting that some form of 'industry' was taking place. The appearance of art on this list is particularly surprising. As we discussed above, Gelb believed that writing systems started out as logographic systems, i.e. where a picture or symbol represents a specific word. This type of system is very unlikely to develop in a society that has no artistic tradition as logographic systems tend to incorporate signs and symbols that are already a part of the society's cultural heritage. Inventing a new script is difficult, inventing one without being able to make use of previously existing signs almost impossible, and coming up with the idea to use small pictures as a recording system without any artistic tradition highly unlikely.

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[39] Gelb, 1962: 221
[40] Roaf, 1990: 19
[41] Cauvin & Chataigner, 1998: 344
[42] Cauvin & Chataigner, 1998: 348
[43] Roaf, 1990: 55

A lot of Gelb's work has since been proven wrong. Indeed the first arguments against his theories were raised in 1952, the year his book was first published. For example it was pointed out that although he cites four examples of syllabic systems developing out of logographic systems: Sumerian cuneiform, Hittite hieroglyphics, the Chinese and Japanese writing systems, and perhaps Cypriote, none of these systems actually develop into an alphabet and so cannot be used to prove his theory[44]. The two examples he gives of syllabaries that do become alphabets are both systems that were introduced into non-literate societies by literate outsiders who already used an alphabet (Alaskan Eskimo writing and West African Bamum writing) and so do not show a natural development but rather an imposed one[45]. Despite these concerns Gelb's work was highly influential for a lot of scholars and it was not until the 1980s that serious efforts begun to be made to explain the fundamental problems with Gelb's theories.

Recent studies by the grammatologist Peter Daniels have pointed out that the alphabet has only developed once, in Phoenicia with later refinements in Greece, so it cannot be said to be a necessary development as Gelb argued. Daniels has also argued that the tripartite system of logographic, syllabic and alphabetic scripts does not in fact cover every type of writing system. He suggests two further types of system, the abjad and the abugida. The abjad are 'alphabetic' systems that only note consonants; this term particularly relates to West Semitic scripts such as Hebrew and Arabic. The abugida are systems that are based on consonants with vowel notation obligatory but secondary so vowels do not have equal status to consonants, for example in the Indic and Ethiopic scripts[46]. Whether one agrees with Daniels' system or not it does highlight the problems with the classifications that Gelb proposed and begins to show the complex nature of writing.

It is thus likely that the notion of writing being a fundamental part of civilisation arises from the fact that we are part of a literate society and so are simply unable to envisage how a complex society could function without writing. Because we are used to writing being a vital part of how we do almost everything we

[44] Edgerton, 1952; 287
[45] Edgerton, 1952: 288
[46] Daniels, 2009: 35

assume that it must therefore be vital to how society functions. It is very difficult to take a step back and realise that there are other ways of solving these challenges which do not necessarily involve writing. For example, whilst some early societies developed a writing system to enable complex administration others did not. The Incas used a system of knotted strings called khipus to record numerical and administrative material[47]. These could be incredibly complex and hold large amounts of information. It was a standardised system so they would have been intelligible to anyone who knew it, whether they knew the person who created the khipu or not, meaning they could be used to convey the information over long distances between people who had never met. As a physical object they could be used to store information for long periods of time and referred back to when necessary. Although they were certainly not a form of writing they were used for hundreds of years to efficiently administer a large and complex empire[48]. This shows that writing is only one solution to the problem of administration and not a necessary pre-condition of administration, or 'civilisation'.

Lévi-Strauss & Slavery

Another theory put forward on the origins of writing has come from the work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss;

> "the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery[49]"

This theory develops over several pieces of work, finally culminating in its fullest explanation in *Tristes Tropiques*[50]. In this autobiography Lévi-Strauss describes a journey through the Brazilian rainforest in 1938 during which he stayed with the Nambikwara tribe. He found that the tribe were not only non-literate but had never previously encountered writing so did not even understand the concept. As an experiment he gave them all paper and pencils. He claimed that because they had no concept of writing, or even art, they did very little with these until they decided to copy what Lévi-Strauss and the other members of his team did. As they could not actually write, this consisted of making wavy lines across the page in imitation of

[47] Brokaw, 2010: 2
[48] Brokaw, 2010: 16
[49] Lévi-Strauss, 1973*:* 299
[50] Derrida, 1997*:* 118

handwriting[51]. More importantly, whilst the majority of the tribe got bored with the game quite quickly, the chief of the tribe realised that he could use this new technology to his advantage, as a sociological tool rather than an intellectual one.

The chief put this idea into action when it came to the ritual exchange of presents between the tribe and Lévi-Strauss' party. He brought with him a 'list' of all the presents to be given out that he had written down in his own version of writing. He then proceeded to 'read' out from the list, item by item, what these were and who they were for. Although as a literate society we know that he was not 'reading' (as he was unable), to his tribe with no real understanding of what reading and writing were he seemed to be doing exactly the same as the anthropologists. Lévi-Strauss claims that the chief did this to increase his prestige and therefore his authority amongst the tribe[52]. This may well be true as according to the political system of the Nambikwara the position of chief is a tenuous one that needs to be constantly reinforced.

It is from this and other similar episodes with the Nambikwara and writing that Lévi-Strauss begins to ponder the function of writing. Based on similar reasoning to that above he argues that long before writing existed mankind had already created most of the building blocks of what is thought of as 'civilisation'[53], and that:

> "between the invention of writing and the birth of modern science, the western world has lived through some 5,000 years, during which time the sum of knowledge has rather gone up and down than a steady increase[54]".

From this he comes to the conclusion that writing has little or no effect on the intellectual efforts of man and so it must have a different function. Lévi-Strauss argues that the only thing writing is always connected to is politics. This does in fact seem to fit with the evidence for early writing in Mesopotamia, Leo Oppenheim explains that there are three functions of writing in the Near East; recording data for the future, i.e. administration[55]; communication of data, e.g. letters or royal edicts; and ceremonial uses, e.g.

[51] Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 296
[52] Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 298
[53] Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 299
[54] Derrida, 1997: 129
[55] Oppenheim, 1977: 230

foundation documents[56]. All of these areas are almost exclusively the domain of government, particularly in the earliest periods in which writing is used, so it is not difficult to see writing as a tool of government rather than a source for intellectual revolution. In fact, if we look at the uses to which writing was put in Mesopotamia it is not until c.500 years after it was invented that writing was used for recording literature, c.2600BC; before this its functions were purely administrative and later also legal[57] (Fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1 - Postgate's Table of Use

This administrative bias fits well with Lévi-Strauss' theory as he argues it is the most important use of writing. By creating an administrative system in which everything is recorded people are forced to become part of the system. By acting within society they interact with the administrative system, and so are recorded and become drawn into a government they did not necessarily want to be involved with. In other words, because the administration has written down people's names the government is able to exploit them. So, for example, Lévi-Strauss argues that only through this kind of system are large-scale building projects possible as a large supply of workers is needed to carry out such a project. This can only be gathered if

[56] Oppenheim, 1977: 234
[57] Postgate, 1992: 66

records are held to determine who is available. Thus, Lévi-Strauss concludes, writing facilitates what he terms 'slavery' and its use for any intellectual or aesthetic pursuits are at best a secondary function, but also to conceal its primary agenda of enslavement[58].

The logic with which Lévi-Strauss comes to his conclusions is enticing but it is clear that it is too simplistic an approach to the problem. One of the first things to consider is the idea that only within an administrative system based on writing are large scale building projects possible. This is clearly incorrect. The city of Jericho, in modern Palestine, provides a good example; the Neolithic city had city walls 3.6m high and 1.8m thick, with a tower built into them that measured 9m in diameter at the base and over 8m in eight, and a vast ditch surrounding the walls. This was certainly a prodigious undertaking and yet all of this was built in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period (PPNA), c.8,300 – 7,800BC[59], c.5,000 years before writing existed. Monumental building projects can evidently be undertaken with no writing system and no literate administration to force people into working for a government. However, the correct social context was still necessary for this wall to be built; in other words Lévi-Strauss is right that some people must have had control over others[60], but this system clearly did not have to use writing. In Neolithic Jericho it was possible to organise this workforce and complete the walls, proving not only that writing is not a tool for 'enslavement', but that such an 'enslavement' of people has been a part of history long before writing was invented.

The link between writing and slavery was not an original idea. Whether consciously or not, Lévi-Strauss was actually following an ancient Greek tradition over 2,000 years old. The ancient Greeks saw almost everything in the world as having a polar opposite; so, for example, in Herodotus the Egyptians are portrayed as the opposites of the Greeks;

> "the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind[61],"

The fact that the Egyptians have different customs than the Greeks does not make them merely strange, but

[58] Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 299
[59] Bar-Yosef, 1986: 157
[60] Postgate, 1992: 225
[61] Herodotus, II. 35

opposite because of the way the Greeks saw the world. One of the pairs of opposites the Greeks saw in the world was democracy and tyranny. As democracy was practised in many Greek cities, 'tyranny' was seen as evil and repressive, therefore anything related to tyranny was also deemed bad. Tyranny was thought to be a feature of the barbaric east where people were ruled by kings; as this was where writing came from as well, writing itself was seen as a tool of oppression by the Greeks[62].

In democratic Greece everything was based on speech and orality. People were commemorated with speeches as opposed to inscriptions used in the east. In the east letters and written commands told people what to do, whereas in Greece issues were discussed and debated in order to reach a conclusion[63]. Herodotus has many examples of the supposed link between tyranny and writing. One such story is that of Deioces, who according to Herodotus was the first Median king. Deioces became a well respected man in his village because of the just decisions that he made. Originally he judged cases by speaking to the claimants. Because of his just and wise decisions the Medes eventually decided to make Deioces their king, however:

> "Once his sovereign power was firmly established, he continued his strict administration of justice. All suits were conveyed to him in the form of written documents, which he would send back after recording upon them his decisions" (Herodotus, I.99-100)

Once he became king, a form of tyranny according to the Greeks, Deioces stopped meeting complainants in person to listen to their cases, instead he insisted that the process was carried out through writing. This clearly illustrates the link the Greeks made between tyranny and writing. However, despite the long standing nature of these arguments there is still no evidence that writing was invented in order to oppress people. It may well have been used for these ends but there is little or no evidence to conclude that this was its 'primary function'.

As an anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss' conclusions are not the only part of his work that need to be studied. In anthropology the methodology is just as important as the conclusion, so we should examine the methodology to see if it is valid or not. In in his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida

[62] Steiner, 1994: 128
[63] Steiner, 1994: 127

deconstructed Lévi-Strauss' methodology and raised a lot of interesting points about the validity of the work. When we look back at the story of the 'writing lesson' we almost immediately find flaws in Lévi-Strauss's methodology. He portrays the Nambikwara as innocent, naïve, and non-violent, which is essential in order to make the contrast with his idea that writing equals violence and oppression[64]. But this is not the case.

Elsewhere in the book Lévi-Strauss tells a story of being lost and alone in the rainforest, hiding in the trees and fearing that if tribesmen come across him he will be killed:

> "I was not, admittedly, the first white man to penetrate that hostile zone. But none of my predecessors had come back alive[65]".

If a tribe is essentially non-violent such a fear would be misplaced. When discussing writing Lévi-Strauss is attempting to back up his argument with the idea that because the Nambikwara did not know about writing they also did not know about violence or hierarchy[66]. This is obviously incorrect. Not only does he give us many examples of the fact that the tribe are perfectly capable of violence, the simple fact that they have a chief immediately proves that they not only know about hierarchy but practice it.

It is also questionable how free from writing the Nambikwara really were. In *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss gives the impression that they have absolutely no concept of writing or art at all, and that they have never encountered them through other people. However, he discusses the Nambikwara in other works and we find there that not only do they have a word for writing, *iekariukedjutu* - literally 'drawing lines'[67], but that some tribe members made diagrams for him explaining their genealogy or their social structure[68]; this suggests a type of pictography. Clearly in *Tristes Tropiques* he adapts the true cultural state of the tribe to fit his conclusions. This seriously calls into question the methodological approach of Lévi-Strauss, despite the apparent neatness of his logic his arguments are deeply flawed.

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[64] Derrida, 1997: 117
[65] Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 290
[66] Derrida, 1997: 135
[67] Derrida, 1997: 123
[68] Derrida, 1997: 124

So what does Derrida propose in place of Lévi-Strauss' argument? Unfortunately this is not an area he discusses at length, simply stating:

> "It is now known, thanks to unquestionable and abundant information that the birth of writing (in the colloquial sense) was nearly everywhere and most often linked to genealogical unease[69]"

Derrida is arguing that writing was invented by people keen to record information from oral traditions that they were afraid of losing. His disclaimer "in the colloquial sense" has saved this statement from being immediately proved incorrect as we know that this type of information was one of the last things to be recorded using writing. From a colloquial, i.e. informal, point of view it is impossible to prove this statement either true or false. We know little about the uses and functions of writing once it became a widespread skill in the ancient world as by that time writing had moved onto perishable materials which do not often survive in the archaeological record.

However Derrida's claim does raise some interesting questions about whether or not an oral society would really feel the need to record their oral traditions in a new way once writing was introduced. It would be very unusual for such a society to suddenly stop trusting in the power of memory and orality that had been a part of their culture from the very beginning. In fact in the Near East the majority of the Sumerian literary tablets are exercises for scribal students and, as we shall discuss further in Chapter Six, these were not written down until Sumerian had died out as a spoken language[70], at least c.800 years after writing had been invented. Most of this literature was not being written down for posterity but in order to practice writing and the Sumerian language itself. It is probable that they were picked simply because they were well known not because it was thought that these things must be written down in case they were forgotten.

It is likely that written documents take time to become the favoured mode of recording no matter what the sphere and however obvious it may appear to us in a literate society. Michael Clanchy, in his work on literacy in England after the Norman conquest, argues that the introduction of a literate bureaucracy within a society takes time to become fully established and trusted. Before non-literates will trust literate modes

[69] Derrida, 1997: 124
[70] Alster, 1976: 109

various problems and prejudices need to be overcome[71]. For example, traditionally conveyances were proven through witnesses remembering both hearing the words of a speech making over the property and seeing the transfer of a symbolic object. Even after written documents became the acceptable way of recording such transactions the symbolic objects and witnesses continued to play a role[72]. For example, a charter confirming the gift of a church in Lincolnshire to the Spalding Priory states that the knife that proved the conveyance was also to be placed in the archive[73], implying the document alone was not felt to be adequate.

There could be several reasons why written documents were not automatically accepted by society. Written documents could be forged, yet it would have been much more difficult to replicate a symbolic object and persuade or bribe all of the witnesses to change their stories[74]. Also, the symbolic objects, and even memories of witnesses may have been thought more durable than parchment[75]. Whatever the reasons may be it is important to realise that writing does not automatically replace or trump non-literate modes of communication and recording. Societies create ways around these problems that work for them and are often loath to replace them with a new system as they simply do not trust it as much.

Effect of Literacy on Thought Processes

As well as the origins of writing, the effects of literacy have been studied in detail. A lot of studies have been carried out looking at literacy and how it affects people, many of which have purported to show that the acquisition of literacy changes the way in which people think:

> "...what functionally literate human beings really are: beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simple natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing, but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has

[71] Clanchy, 1979: 149
[72] Clanchy, 1979: 205
[73] Clanchy, 1979: 207
[74] Clanchy, 1979: 211
[75] Clanchy, 1979: 207

transformed human consciousness[76]"

While many scholars have argued this point of view one of the most prominent supporters of the idea is Jack Goody. He presented the fullest explanation in his book *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, which built on several of his previous studies. In this work Goody was attempting to move away from the earlier anthropological work that adopted a cognitive dichotomy of 'us' and 'them', 'savage' and 'domesticated', as espoused by scholars such as Lévi-Strauss[77]. As we saw above, these were the same kind of ideas that led Childe to develop his theories on civilisation and urbanisation.

Although Goody agrees that differences could be found in the way people in different societies thought or acted he argues that they were not as fundamental as this dichotomy implies. Instead of looking for general differences in human thought between societies he wants to explain more specifically why these differences may be found[78]. He argues that one of the main reasons for these differences was a change in the means of communication, specifically the introduction of writing and the acquisition of literacy. His theory is based on two areas; modern anthropological work and historical sources. The anthropological approach examines societies that are in the process of acquiring, or have only recently or partially acquired, literacy. This includes fieldwork that Goody carried out himself in societies where literacy was not necessarily the norm. His historical evidence consists of examples and information from ancient societies that became literate, particularly ancient Greece but also Sumer and Egypt. Using this evidence, Goody explains several reasons why literacy changes cognition. He argues that by changing the way we receive, store and interact with information, the way people think also changes. He argues that literacy produces a kind of 'logical' and 'rational' thinking that is not found amongst non-literate peoples. At a basic level, orality relies on the context in which a communication is given, therefore thought is also context-bound. Writing removes the need for context and so allows the opposite, abstract thinking[79].

One of the most important changes, Goody argues, is that by writing things down people are able to analyse information in ways that are not possible with purely oral discourse; writing encourages criticism and

[76] Ong, 1982: 78
[77] Goody, 1977: 4
[78] Goody, 1977: 8f
[79] Street, 1984: 21

commentary[80] in several different ways. Writing is timeless[81] which means that provided it is preserved anyone in the future can analyse a communication, regardless of how long ago it was originally made. They are also able to scrutinise any previous analysis and so layers of knowledge and understanding can be built[82]. This is not to say that this kind of consideration does not happen in oral societies, but it is less likely that the original communication and the subsequent layers of analysis will be remembered accurately. No matter how much care and effort is made to memorise oral discourse things will be forgotten or changed, especially over long periods of time. The information will have less direct relevance to subsequent generations making it ever more likely that it will be modified. Different generations adapt oral traditions to make them more relevant to their current social, cultural and environmental situation. In this way the tradition is more useful to the society and so it is more likely to be remembered[83], albeit in its altered form. This makes it almost impossible to build up the layers of analysis possible with written language as with each generation there is a chance the original communication will be changed. Although analysis of this information may take place, it will be combined with the original information to create something new and refined. The fact that these changes have taken place will be forgotten and so the development of an idea will no longer be clear.

Writing allows information to become depersonalized and abstract[84] which makes it easier for people to contradict or criticise it. If information is learnt in an oral setting from someone who is more respected, older, or in a position of power, then it is harder to challenge, potentially a certain amount of personal bravery and a willingness to subvert the social hierarchy is needed. This is unlikely to happen for every single issue and so many things may go unchallenged. With writing it is no longer necessary to have a personal confrontation, and indeed if the response is written it can be done anonymously, so analysis and criticism are much more likely to arise.

[80] Goody: 1977: 37
[81] Goody, 1977: 44
[82] Goody, 1977: 37
[83] Goody & Watt, 1963: 307
[84] Goody, 1977: 44

Writing also makes it much easier to spot contradictions and allows the time for them to be considered[85]. Unless contradictory oral statements are made close together and to the same audience it is unlikely that they will be recognised. With writing it is much easier to compare different statements made at different times and in different situations. With oral discourse not everybody remembers things in the same way, making it harder for all to agree if there has been a contradiction or mistake. This could also make it less likely that someone noticing a potential contradiction would mention it as there may be an insecurity about whether or not they are correct, and whether or not they will be believed. The example Goody uses is an essay by Margaret Masterman which discusses Thomas Kuhn's work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). In her essay 'The Nature of Paradigm', Masterman points out that Kuhn uses the word 'paradigm' in 21 different ways. This, Goody argues would be an impossible task for an oral society[86]. However, in his article deconstructing Goody's theories, John Halverson points out that whilst the actual work Masterman carried out to create her index of the different uses is certainly only possible with writing, the original detection of these differences relied on oral techniques[87].

It has been argued by some that these arguments are not necessarily persuasive as they ignore the oral traditions of debate and oratory[88]. However these are very specific contexts in which rules are followed that may not be obeyed elsewhere. It also does not address the ability to analyse the communications over time: unless one is present at a debate there is little opportunity to disagree with or refute a statement. But as Goody states it is not that oral societies are unable to think 'reflectively', they simply lack many of the tools available to a literate society and so are incapable of doing so in the same way[89].

Goody is also particularly interested in the way in which writing enables people to graphically present information in new ways, specifically lists and tables. This, he argues, allows further and different analysis than could be achieved in an oral setting. Although he accepts that non-literate societies do use lists in

[85] Goody, 1977: 44
[86] Goody, 1977: 48
[87] Halverson, 1992: 306
[88] Street, 1984: 57
[89] Goody, 1977:44

certain ways, for example in genealogies and some rituals[90], he argues that graphically representing this information led to "significant developments of a sort that might be loosely referred to as a change in consciousness"[91]. This mainly happens because lists encourage a high level of abstraction. The entries can be read in different directions, and the items can be ordered in numerous different ways: by sound, initial character, category and so on[92]. Written lists therefore encourage people to think in ways that oral communications do not.

There is also an argument that the start of literacy in a society coincides with the separation of 'myth' and 'history' within that same society. This may be because writing creates documentary evidence which can be used to create what we would class as 'history', or because writing down memories allows them to be compared and inconsistencies noted and discussed[93]. Goody particularly stresses the creation of archives as leading to 'history'. As well as providing the documentary evidence used by most historians, literates in a society that uses archives are likely to have been taught the kind of critical analysis that historians base their work on[94]. He also goes back to his arguments about lists, arguing that they are a fundamental step in the process of writing history. He uses the example of the Sumerian stories of creation, the flood, and early hero epics which Donald Wiseman argued were based on historical fact, making use of genealogies such as the Sumerian King List[95]. Thus lists are an important part of the process of a society starting an historical tradition[96].

Goody argues against the dichotomy of myth vs. history and science vs. magic as linked to the idea of primitive vs. civilised societies espoused by anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss, as all societies contain some of both, to different extents, particularly in the realms of science (or technology) and magic (or superstition). Although some anthropologists have argued that these can be seen as precursors or relics, depending on the society, it still shows that societies accept both at the same time with no apparent

[90] Goody, 1977: 81
[91] Goody, 1977: 75
[92] Goody, 1977: 81
[93] Goody & Watt, 1963: 325
[94] Goody, 1977: 149
[95] Wiseman, 1970: 41
[96] Goody, 1977: 91

difficulties[97]. But of course writing does not necessarily lead to 'history' as we understand it. For example China has a long tradition of written literature, but not of scientific method in the western sense of rationality, skepticism and analysis. Although it does have a tradition of compiling detailed chronological records[98] it does not have the same tradition of historical research found in literate western societies[99].

Whilst Goody's arguments still have great weight in modern discourse, in the last few decades, several studies have shown that this supposed difference in thought processes between literate and non-literate people is not as clear cut as it seems, is not necessarily true, and if it can be proved at all is not necessarily related to being literate. To start, literacy and writing systems are not homogenous between societies, they change from culture to culture[100]. If literacy itself is not the same between cultures then it is difficult to argue that the effect of literacy is the same between cultures. There is also the problem of defining what a literate culture actually is, in contrast to an oral society. Literacy and orality are in fact mixed in all societies, as no presently existing culture works exclusively with one or the other[101]. This makes it very hard to prove that generalisations about the effects of literacy come about solely because of a society being literate or non-literate.

It can also often be shown that things claimed to be inherent to literacy are actually the consequence of "conventions of literate practice in particular societies[102]", i.e. how a society uses and responds to literacy. Many of the studies that have been carried out to prove the effect of literacy on a society can actually be shown to be testing explicitness rather than logic or rationality as purported. They are in fact testing the effects of a particular education system[103], specifically the western education system in which the majority of the scholars carrying out these tests have themselves been educated. This means that consciously or not they inherently believe that the effects of this system are the most rational and logical ones as they reflect their own cultural construct of cognition and intelligence.

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97 Goody, 1977: 148
98 Gough, 1968: 74
99 Finnegan, 1988: 39f
100 Street, 1984: 2
101 Street, 1984: 4
102 Street, 1984: 4
103 Street, 1984: 4

One such test was carried out with literate and non-literate Wolof children from Senegal, who were asked to explain the relationship of a group of objects. Children whose answer was simply "red" were deemed not to have logical thought compared to those that said "they are red" because this showed that they were bound by context[104]. More of the children who were literate, and had therefore been to school, answered "they are red" than the non-literate, i.e. unschooled, children. Although the scholars who originally carried out these tests argued that this proved literate children thought logically and non-literate children did not, it is actually a consequence of the school system rather than literacy itself. The children who went to school had been taught that they must be detached and explicit in exam situations. The unschooled children had not been taught this and so generally assumed that as the examiner could see the picture they did not need to refer to it[105]. All the test actually showed was that children who had been to school had been taught to behave in exam situations in the way the examiners expected. Importantly, whichever group a child belonged to they had a similar chance of giving the correct answer: all of the objects were red and with respect to this information both groups scored equally well.

In fact it is argued that the entire system in which literacy functions is far more important as a determining factor in the cultural and sociological changes that literacy will have on a society than literacy itself. As mentioned above, literacy and writing are not homogenous across all societies: they are a social construct and so their influence varies depending on how and why they were constructed[106]. This argument has been taken as a rebuttal of Goody's work, the final proof that literacy itself does not change the way in which people think. However, Goody himself had actually established this in *Domestication of the Savage Mind*, stating "the social structure behind the communicative acts is often of prime importance[107]". Writing itself was not the only factor that changes the way people think, the system into which it is brought, or which brings it into being, has an important effect as well.

It is not just the western education system that can be used to illustrate this point. Goody based parts of his

[104] Street, 1984: 23
[105] Street, 1984: 31
[106] Street, 1984: 65
[107] Goody, 1977: 51

argument on the fact that alphabetic literacy and logical thought in the western tradition both first appear at roughly the same time in ancient Greece. We know that the ancient Greeks were certainly literate and they are often credited with being the first society to exploit what we term 'rational thought' in their science and philosophy. Yet the Greek education system was heavily reliant on oral tradition, and most if not all of their teaching was through lectures and debates. They even read aloud rather than silently, showing at the very least a different form and use of literacy to the one we are used to today[108]. Socrates, often thought of as the father of philosophy, is not known to have written anything down but worked by questioning people in a purely oral setting. Any arguments that philosophy was able to come into being because of writing are not viable; Socrates viewed philosophy as a form of oral debate and as this was the basis of Greek philosophy it suggests that writing played little or no role in its formation.

Plato, through whose writing we come to know about Socrates' work, actually attacked writing[109]. In the *Phaedrus* Plato espouses the view that writing is incapable of truly teaching people. He argued against the idea of writing improving memory and being a way for people to learn. He stated that it should in fact only be used as a way to remind people of what they already know. By learning through reading rather than oral discourse students are unable to learn the full truth because written information is not open to questions, it is only capable of espousing one view, of giving one piece of information. Any requests of writing for further information on a subject are sure to fail because once written it cannot change. Whereas learning and teaching through oral discourse allows the student to question and debate information with the teacher, thus truly understanding it[110].

Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at how writing has been perceived by scholars. We have discussed ideas about how and why writing was first invented and the effects that it may have had on the societies that have used it. The link that scholars have made between writing and 'civilisation' is particularly interesting as it seems to come up in many of the theories and studies. Sometimes this link is explicit, for example in the

[108] Finnegan, 1988: 56
[109] Thomas, 1992: 3
[110] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274-277

works of Childe. Other times it has been implicit, for example in the theory put forward by Lévi-Strauss, but also in the ideas of Defoe, who was writing in a time where the Christian religion was seen as fundamental to 'civilisation' and non-Christians were seen as barbaric and fundamentally 'uncivilised'.

Of course the fundamental problem when discussing the idea of 'civilisation' is its definition. It seems that the way it is usually defined it is not as a specific concept itself, but rather as a collection of other attributes such as law, governance or writing. This list of attributes changes from one definition to another. Once the list of aspects, whatever they may be, have been checked off then a society is called 'civilised'. In many ways this makes the idea of 'civilisation' rather useless, if people do not agree on what precisely the attributes are then they cannot agree on what 'civilisation' is. At best, calling a society 'civilised' or not has very little meaning, at worst it is a judgement on that society. The attributes that are assigned to the idea of 'civilisation' are always ones that are present in the society which is making the decision. I would argue that what we really mean when we question whether or not a society is 'civilised' is how similar their society is to ours. Whether we are conscious of it or not, the true definition of 'civilisation' is our own society.

What is interesting is that there does seem to have been a similar concept in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Although they may not have used the same terminology, it is clear that they recognised that other societies did things in different ways, or not at all, and thought less of them for it. This is particularly clear in some of the literature, which we will study further in Chapter Four. The Mesopotamian story of *Enki and Inanna* centers around an actual list of attributes that could be bestowed upon man by the god Enki. The goddess Inanna is keen to get these attributes for her city so that it would have more glory than other cities, it would be more advanced and thus more 'civilised'. The other Mesopotamian story that suggests an idea of 'civilisation' is *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta*. This story is based around the idea of riddles and challenges being sent between rival cities, all of which were won by the city of Uruk because it had technology that the city of Aratta did not. It is also made clear that Aratta is thought to be inferior to Uruk; it is Uruk that the goddess Inanna, patron of both cities, prefers. There is also literature from Egypt suggesting they held similar ideas. The *Story of Sinuhe* tells of Sinuhe, an Egyptian who for slightly unclear

reasons flees to the Levant and builds a life there. He becomes wealthy and respected, he has a large family and a good relationship with the king. However as he becomes old he longs to return to Egypt. Once back, regardless of how rich and prosperous he was in the Levant, the story makes clear that this was considered inferior compared to life in Egypt, "thus was my squalor returned to the foreign land[111]".

Although the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians may not have had the same concept of 'civilisation' that exists in the modern world, they certainly seem to have the idea that certain technologies, or certain ways of living your life, were superior to others. This is effectively what we are expressing when we use the term 'civilisation'. It seems clear that however we define 'civilisation' in the modern world writing is considered a part of it. In this study I aim to see if this was also the case for ancient societies.

[111] Lichtheim, 1975: 233

Chapter 2 – Investigating The Birth of Writing: A Story of Competition

Most history is written by using at least some of the texts and documents created and used by the societies under study. Societies in existence before writing was invented are usually consigned to the category "prehistory" and it is generally assumed that this means detailed or accurate factual information will be more difficult or even impossible to come by. Therefore the moment in time when written records become available generates a huge amount of interest from historians and the wider public. As with most things in which a large number of people are interested, this leads to a great variety of conclusions and interpretations. Because of this, a history of controversy surrounds the beginnings of both the cuneiform and hieroglyphic systems. In this chapter we will look at some of these debates, starting with the discussions surrounding the decipherment of cuneiform and hieroglyphs, and then the on-going debate surrounding the question of when and where the first scripts were invented. This, together with Chapter One, will give us a full understanding of the modern views of early writing.

The Decipherment of Cuneiform and Hieroglyphs

When interest in both ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia began to intensify in the 18th and 19th centuries it was their writing systems that obstructed a proper understanding of their antiquities. Although in both regions writing was thought to have been used, the language and scripts were dead, no-one could understand the texts. Both scripts were eventually deciphered as a result of the efforts of a great many people. The stories of how this came about have been covered in detail elsewhere[112] and so do not need to be described here once again. What is more relevant to the present study is the intellectual context in which these decipherments took place. There are two main themes running through both stories of decipherment: religion and rivalry, both personal and national. In this section we will look at how they affected the way in which the decipherments were achieved.

[112] See e.g.: F. Griffith, 1951, E. Iversen, 1961 M. Pope, 1999, L. Adkins, 2003, A. Robinson, 2006

Religion and Philosophy as Motivation for Decipherment

One theme that runs throughout both narratives of decipherment is that of religion. Because the decipherment was on the whole carried out in western Europe and the 19th century the setting is a Christian one. It is about people trying to harmonise the new information about the past with their religion and world views.

Neoplatonism and the Egyptian Writing System

The religious philosophy of Neoplatonism attempted to reconcile the Greek philosophy of Plato with Christian religion. It began with the early Church Fathers, such as Eusebius and Clement of Alexandria[113], who had lived and worked in the late second and fourth centuries AD when diverse Greek philosophical schools were active and influential in Europe and the Near East. Neoplatonism went through various phases, falling in and out of fashion until the European Renaissance when it became popular again. Attempting to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christian religion was once again seen as both important and fashionable in this period because of the European rediscovery of many of the classical works[114].

At the same time the study of the Hermetic traditions was also revived. This was in part because of the rediscovery and translation of the *Hermetica*, a work purportedly written by Hermes Trismegistos, a Greek god identified with the Egyptian god Thoth. The *Hermetica* were actually written in the second or third centuries AD in Alexandria, the same intellectual setting in which the early Neoplatonists were working. The *Hermetica* were thought to be proof that the pagan religion of Egypt had prophesied the advent of Christianity[115]. This Hermetic scholarship was closely tied to the Neoplatonic schools as they shared similar philosophical ideas. Hermeticism believed that "the Physical World, the Psyche, the Spirit and the Divinity" were a spectrum of consciousness and that a person with appropriate training could travel between the different states[116]. Neoplatonic philosophy argued that with education and training some

[113] Walker, 1972: 1
[114] Walker, 1972: 2
[115] MacNulty, 1991: 12
[116] MacNulty, 1991: 13

people would be able to gain enlightenment and thus approach the divinity[117].

The study of Egyptian hieroglyphs was a part of the Neoplatonic approach almost from the very beginning. Plato himself was thought to have travelled through Egypt and it was here that his philosophy was supposed to have been refined[118]; moreover, according to the Hermetic tradition an Egyptian god had predicted Christianity. Because of the antiquity of Egyptian culture it was believed that the Egyptians had access to "divine ideas and sacred knowledge[119]" unknown to other cultures. The ancient Greeks thought that the Egyptians had been the original inventors of writing[120] and therefore this knowledge could be revealed through their writing. Yet outside Egypt Greeks had little or no idea how to read hieroglyphs, and the view that the signs were allegorical was widespread. Many works were written on the subject in antiquity, but these were all lost as interest in the subject started to fade.

This was the situation until the 15th century when a copy of the work of Horapollo was discovered[121], one of the many lost Greek manuscripts that purported to explain the meaning of hieroglyphs. Its discovery led to a revival of interest in the subject of Egyptian writing. The timing of this discovery was important as it coincided with the renewed interest in Neoplatonism. As this philosophical school had always studied hieroglyphs they were once again foremost in the minds of many of the most influential thinkers[122]. Although this revived a desire to understand hieroglyphs, no breakthrough in the decipherment was made. It was still held that hieroglyphs were allegorical in nature and such a deep misunderstanding prevented any advance. However, it meant that over the next centuries the academic world retained an interest in hieroglyphs and continued to study the script, which eventually did lead to its decipherment.

The Bible and the Mesopotamian Writing System

One of the aims of early students of Egypt and the Near East, was to prove that the Bible was factually correct. Various people and places of Egypt and Mesopotamia are mentioned in the Bible, for example the

[117] Bernal, 1987: 132
[118] Young, 1823: 19
[119] Iversen, 1961: 45
[120] Iversen, 1961: 43
[121] Pope, 1999: 18
[122] Iversen, 1961: 64

cities Nineveh and Babylon, and the Assyrian kings Shalmaneser and Sennacherib. It was hoped that archaeology would provide independent proof of their existence and thus the validity of the Bible. Certain episodes in the Old Testament were also expected to have left traces in the archaeological record, such as the ten plagues and the flight of the Israelites from Egypt. This notably necessitated excavations, but it was also recognised by scholars that they would need to be able to read the texts; a temple could only be linked to a known person from the Bible if one could read the inscription giving the information.

As discussed in Chapter One, the Bible was one of the few texts accepted by early scholars to explain the origins of the world[123]. Before hieroglyphs and cuneiform were deciphered it was the main text used to set archaeological finds in their context. In his publication describing his excavations in northern Iraq, before cuneiform had been fully deciphered, Austen Henry Layard frequently uses the Bible to account for his discoveries. When pondering the use of the ivories he found at Nimrud he explains:

> "These ornaments may have belonged to a throne or chest, or may have decorated the walls or ceilings of the room. In Scripture we find frequent allusion to the employment of this beautiful material both in architecture and in furniture[124]"

When describing a relief panel showing the Assyrians besieging a city (possibly BM 1848,1104.4) (Fig. 2.1) he links it to the descriptions of such actions in the Old Testament:

> "This mode of besieging a city, as well as the various methods of attack portrayed in the sculptures, are frequently alluded to in Scripture. Ezekiel, prophesying of Jerusalem, exclaims, "lay siege against it, and *build a fort against it, and cast a mound against it*; set the camp also against it, and set the *battering-rams* against it round about:" and Isaiah, "Thus saith the Lord concerning the King of Assyria: he shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, *nor cast a bank against it*" [125]".

Because the depictions showed scenes that echoed the Old Testament passages they were seen at the time as proof of the historical accuracy of the text.

[123] Adkins & Adkins, 2001: 2
[124] Layard, 1852: 247
[125] Layard, 1852: 255

Figure 2.1 - Stone Panel From the Central Palace of King Tiglath-Pileser III (BM 1848,1104.4)

In his second season excavating at Nineveh (1849-1851) Layard uncovered the famous relief scenes showing the siege of Lachish[126]. This story was known from the Old Testament which describes Sennacherib's campaigns in Judah, specifically naming Lachish as one of the cites he besieged[127]. When the reliefs were originally discovered cuneiform was still not fully understood so it was not known what battle the reliefs portrayed. They were also not in very good condition[128], the top half was destroyed and the bottom half was charred and broken into numerous pieces from when the palace had been sacked in 612BC. It was thought too costly to remove them and ship them back to England, especially as the British Museum already owned similar pieces.

As early as 1850 Henry Rawlinson, later to become one of the decipherers of cuneiform, had advised the British Museum to stop shipping Assyrian palace reliefs back to England as he felt that they had enough examples. Excavation should continue, but only to find new inscriptions which should be copied and sent

[126] Ussishkin, 1982: 65
[127] II Kings 18; Isaiah 36, 37
[128] Larsen, 1996: 270

back to Britain for further study, copies of the images were thought unnecessary. Rawlinson was far from the only person to hold these views: the influential magazine *The Athenaeum* had made the same point[129], as had the respected sculptor and Royal Academy Professor, Sir Richard Westmacott, in a speech to Parliament[130]. It was generally believed at the time that all artistic endeavour of antiquity was a progression that culminated in the art of classical Greece[131]. Whilst it was thought interesting to have some pieces from before this golden age in order to see this development, as objects themselves they were considered almost worthless.

However, in 1853 Rawlinson visited Nineveh and along with Hormuzd Rassam, who had been employed by the British Museum to continue Layard's work, chose a number of artefacts to be shipped back to England[132]. By this time cuneiform was better understood and the inscriptions on the Lachish reliefs had been read. As soon as it was realised that they depicted an episode that appears in the Old Testament the decision was taken to ship them back to Britain, regardless of the earlier reasons for not doing so. The reliefs arrived in London in 1855[133] and have been on continuous display at the British Museum since 1856. The continued interest in the reliefs can be seen by their inclusion in *A History of the World in 100 Objects*[134], a recent British Museum and BBC collaboration. This project showcased objects the curators felt were best able to tell the history of the world. The Lachish reliefs were chosen as one of five objects used to tell the history of the period 1100-300BC[135] and to highlight the ongoing horror of deportation and exile that accompany war and conquest[136].

This shows why there was interest in the Near East at the time. As a civilisation itself it was not thought highly of, unlike for example, that of the ancient Greeks, or even the Egyptians. It was only because of its links to the Bible and these other more highly regarded civilisations that the Near East was thought to be worth studying, so it could confirm and supplement the information about ancient history that already

[129] Larsen, 1996: 227
[130] Larsen, 1996: 103
[131] Larsen, 1996: 212
[132] Ussishkin, 1982: 67
[133] Ussishkin, 1982: 67
[134] MacGregor, 2010
[135] MacGregor, 2010: 131
[136] MacGregor, 2010: 136f

existed. It was deemed important to excavate these sites and decipher cuneiform so the texts could be read, and the information gathered. On the one hand the decipherment of cuneiform was encouraged as a way of gathering new knowledge of all these civilisations, but on the other hand the civilisation that had created and used this writing system was thought to be almost worthless and study of it for its own sake was not encouraged.

Prestige as Motivation for Decipherment

The other theme that runs through the story of decipherment is that of prestige. Attempting to Decipher both scripts was something that a great many people put a lot of time and effort into. Because of this it is natural that those who carried out this work were keen for their contributions to be recognised, even if this was at the expense of other scholars. With hieroglyphs this debate only really began once the decipherment was more or less complete and published, as before this the people working on the script had little or no idea what their peers were achieving. With the later decipherment of cuneiform this rivalry started much earlier, as the two main protagonists were aware of their rivals from a very early point owing to public lectures and preliminary publications.

Rivalry Between Nations: Britain and France

It is now usually accepted that the honour of deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs should go to the French scholar Jean-Francois Champollion. However, the contributions of the English scientist Thomas Young are felt by some to have been overlooked in this assessment. Young is probably best known for his work as a physicist. He was the first person to prove that light travels as a wave and is not a stream of particles as Newton had hypothesised[137]. He was also known for his work on optics and was a renowned linguist and scholar of ancient languages, amongst many other interests[138]. He had originally trained as a physician and worked as a doctor for most of his life. After he came under attack for his scientific theories in 1805 many of his articles were published anonymously so as to protect his medical reputation[139], and with it his main income.

[137] Robinson, 2006: 1
[138] Robinson, 2006: 2
[139] Robinson, 2006: 119f

Young's work was certainly an important part of the scholarship that Champollion was able to draw upon to reach his final breakthrough. Young's hieroglyphic discoveries included that the language recorded in the demotic script was derived from the language used for hieroglyphs[140], a key factor in understanding both scripts. He first recognised this in 1815 and published it in 1819, but Champollion does not seem to have come to this conclusion until 1821[141]. He was one of the first people to suggest that the demotic script was at least partially phonetic, but also used versions of some hieroglyphs as logograms[142]. He also identified the sign used to identify female names and the plural marker[143].

Young's most important breakthrough came when he realised that there were six cartouches on the Rosetta Stone, three short ones and three long ones. In the three longer cartouches the first half was identical to the shorter cartouches. Using the Greek version of the text Young realised that the shorter cartouches spelt Ptolemy, and the longer ones Ptolemy with an epithet. As he was working under the assumption that foreign names (such as the Greek Ptolemy) were spelt phonetically he was able to assign phonetic values to the signs that were used to spell the name[144]. We now know that some of his values were incorrect and some of his reasoning was flawed, but his method and results were published in 1819. Champollion's breakthrough in 1822 was based on very similar work, taking cartouches whose translation were known (including one of Ptolemy) and applying phonetic values to the signs[145]. Champollion admitted that he had read Young's article, probably in 1821, but claimed that it had not influenced his work[146]. After Champollion published his major work on hieroglyphs Young abandoned his work on them and turned his attention to the decipherment of demotic, a task which many give him credit for achieving[147].

Because his discoveries in hieroglyphs seem to have led directly to Champollion's decipherment some feel that Young should be given at least as much honour. This is an interesting claim, as if we follow this logic

[140] Iversen, 1961: 134
[141] Robinson, 2006: 213
[142] Robinson, 2006: 157
[143] Griffith, 1951: 41
[144] Robinson, 2006: 159f
[145] Robinson, 2006: 214f
[146] Robinson, 2006: 213
[147] Robinson, 2006: 231

then there are many scholars who could claim the title of decipherer. In 1763 Jean-Jacques Barthélémy, a French priest and scholar, was the first person to suggest that cartouches contained royal or divine names[148]. The Dane Carsten Niebuhr was the first scholar to begin collating a table of hieroglyphs, in 1774, to try and see how many individual hieroglyphs there actually were and what variations in form existed[149]. Jorgen Zoega, another Danish scholar, published his discovery that the lines of hieroglyphs started at whichever point the signs (most obviously the animals and people) were facing in 1797[150]. On their own none of these discoveries would have led to the decipherment of hieroglyphs but because Champollion was able to use the work of all these men and others as a basis for his own work he was able to decipher hieroglyphs. In fact had it not been for the decades of previous scholarship Young, too, would have struggled to make his own breakthroughs.

Champollion and Young both participated in the argument over who had deciphered hieroglyphs. This continued right up until Young's death in May 1829. Just a few weeks before this Champollion wrote a letter to his brother which included a discussion of this subject:

> "So poor Dr. Young is incorrigible? Why flog a mummified horse?...The Brit can do whatever he wants - it will remain ours: and all of old England will learn from young France how to spell hieroglyphs[151]"

It is clear from the language that Champollion had no intention of acknowledging the work of Young. As far as Champollion was concerned the honour of deciphering hieroglyphs was to belong to himself and France.

National rivalry is one of the main reasons for this debate over who deserved the credit for the decipherment of hieroglyphs. Anglo-French rivalry has a long tradition. Indeed, the British only had possession of the Rosetta Stone because they had defeated the French in Egypt in 1801 and had received it as part of the subsequent treaty, or as Young put it “which the British Army had afterwards the honour of

148 Iversen, 1961: 107
149 Pope, 1999: 54
150 Pope, 1999: 57
151 Champollion, 2001: 184

bringing to this country as a proud trophy of their gallantry and success[152]". The Napoleonic wars ran from 1803-1815, ending just as Young began his work on hieroglyphs. This war had intensified the rivalry between the two nations to a level rarely seen before or since, and it would have been fresh in everyone's mind. This may help explain sentiments such as those expressed by Champollion in the above letter.

We know from various sources that both Champollion and Young displayed the casual xenophobia that was common at the time on both sides of the channel. As a young man Champollion disliked one of his teachers, Louis Mathieu Langlès, and was thought incredibly witty for giving him an insulting nickname – l'Anglais[153]. Later in life he was offered the chair of History and Ancient Languages at Turin University, an offer he turned down because "to leave France is a true emigration for the profit of foreigners, and I like neither foreigners nor emigrés[154]". Young was just as disdainful of foreigners: in his anonymous review of Champollion's *L'Égypte sous les Pharaons* he speculates what might have happened if the British had not beaten the French and made them leave Egypt:

> "Perhaps it would be well for Europe if the French were suffered to acquire the country: since the destructive character of the climate would render it an efficacious drain for the superfluous young men of France, who otherwise become troublesome neighbours: and the sympathetic licentiousness of French and Ægyptian manners would facilitate an amalgamation of the people[155]"

These sort of xenophobic feelings would have been seen as perfectly acceptable at the time and do not seem to have interfered with personal relationships between scholars. Champollion and Young continued a friendly relationship after this review, though the fact it was anonymous may well have facilitated this. It also give us an insight into how British people at the time viewed the French and Egyptians, as troublesome and licentious, and suggests that national rivalry was common throughout society, not just in the political or lower classes.

The glory of having deciphered hieroglyphs was something that both countries desired as a matter of

[152] Young, 1823: 4
[153] Adkins & Adkins, 2000: 76
[154] Adkins & Adkins, 2000: 145
[155] Adkins & Adkins, 2000: 142

national pride. Young stated that one of his reasons for publishing his major work on the subject, *An Account of Some Recent Discoveries in Hieroglyphical Literature and Egyptian Antiquities* (1823), was:

> "because I was desirous of securing, at least, for my country, what is justly considered as a desirable acquisition to every country, the reputation of having enlarged the boundaries of human knowledge[156]"

It is clear from the work of both Young and Champollion that this nationalistic fervour was very important to both of them. Deciphering hieroglyphs was seen as a way to prove the intelligence and skill of their scholars and to gain a head start in translating the monuments of Egypt. It may also have been an acceptable way of presenting their own ambition. Both these men clearly also desired personal glory, but admitting this publicly would have seemed as crass then as it would today. By claiming it is for the glory of the country rather than themselves they are able to both incite and enjoy the accolades openly.

Although the history of the decipherment of cuneiform seems at first glance to be less bound up with national pride it is not entirely free of such concerns. In a reversal of the story of hieroglyphs, despite the fact the credit for the decipherment of cuneiform is usually given to British scholars, the work of a French scholar is felt, by some, to have been vital to the task. Born in Hamburg, Jules Oppert moved to France in 1847, as his Jewish heritage prevented him from continuing his scholarly career in Germany[157]. He became a French citizen in 1854[158]. He was a scholar of oriental languages, speaking Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and Hebrew amongst others[159], and in 1881 was given the chair of Assyrian Philology and Archaeology at the College de France, a position created especially for him. He also became President of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1891[160]. It is clear from his academic career and publications that, unlike some others linked to the decipherment of cuneiform (see below), he was a serious and well respected academic.

The main reason for Oppert's claim to have deciphered cuneiform is the fact that he was included in the test

[156] Young, 1823: x
[157] Lion & Michel, 2009: 83
[158] Lion & Michel, 2009: 86
[159] Lion & Michel, 2009: 82, 94
[160] Lion & Michel, 2009: 92

of 1857. This test, to decide whether cuneiform could indeed be translated, was taken by four scholars: Henry Rawlinson, Edward Hincks, William Henry Fox Talbot and Julius Oppert, who sent transcriptions and translations of an inscription of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I to the Royal Asiatic Society [RAS]. The translations were then compared and it was agreed that, as they were all very similar, cuneiform had indeed been deciphered.

The reason for Oppert's involvement is explained by Edwin Norris in a letter to Hincks. Two independent translations of the inscription had already been given to the RAS by Rawlinson and Fox Talbot:

> "Dr. Oppert, who was present at the public meeting where this was stated, asked permission to be allowed to send in a version of the same Inscription which he also was preparing so that the evidence might be more conclusive. It has occurred to Sir Henry [Rawlinson], that a still further corroboration would be attained if you likewise would favour the council with your independent version of the same document[161]"

One gets the sense that Oppert was simply included out of politeness, and because he was not thought to be as well versed in cuneiform as Edward Hincks it became necessary to involve him as well.

The official report on this endeavour[162] makes for very interesting reading. The committee given the task of comparing the versions states:

> "the undersigned compared with considerable care those versions, which were understood to be those of Colonel Rawlinson, Dr. Hincks, and Mr. Fox Talbot. They had greater difficulty with that of Dr. Oppert, whose translation not having the same continuity, could not so easily be brought into parallel with the others. It is to be regretted also that Dr. Oppert did not translate into French, in which language his version would have been more clear and precise, and might have been compared with equal facility. The three other versions were read passage by passage."

The report is very polite about Oppert and excuses are made for the disparities in his work: he was using a slightly different copy of the inscription and was translating into English not French. Fox Talbot is also

[161] Cathcart, 2009: 18
[162] Fox Talbot, Hincks, Rawlinson & Oppert, 1861: 150-219

excused "Mr. Fox Talbot, who was later in the field, though, on the whole, mostly arriving at the same conclusions, was less positive and precise[163]". However, it is clear from the fact that the committee was unable to really compare Oppert's work to that of the others, and from reading the translation that he gave, that his understanding of cuneiform was simply not as good as that of Rawlinson and Hincks, for whom no excuses were felt necessary.

It seems that at the time, whilst he was well regarded as a scholar, he was not felt to have any real claim to have deciphered cuneiform, despite what he himself thought. Indeed, letters between Oppert and Hincks show Oppert arguing for his primacy in discovering many different points in the decipherment of cuneiform. This discussion begins in 1859 when Oppert writes a list of all the things that he believed he had discovered first, including polyphony, phonetic complements, and the values of 180 syllabic signs and over 400 ideograms[164], much of which Hincks did not agree with. A series of letters between Oppert and Hincks in 1862[165] show that the debate between the two men continued. Hincks even forwarded some of these letters to Fox Talbot for his opinions on the matter, he agreed that Oppert was certainly claiming credit for things Rawlinson and Hincks had discovered[166]. It seems that Hincks and Oppert eventually had to agree to disagree[167], and their academic correspondence continued about other matters.

However, a recent French work on the subject nevertheless gives Oppert as much space and credit as Rawlinson and Hincks for the decipherment of cuneiform[168], and particular attention is drawn to the translations he made of various inscriptions before 1857[169]. One of the main reasons for this is that Oppert is considered French and so national pride insists that he is given credit. As we saw with the debate over hieroglyphs, a national claim to decipherment is thought to be very important and so, even today, ways of doing so are sought even when the situation seems relatively clear cut.

[163] Fox Talbot et al, 1861: 154
[164] Cathcart, 2009: 60
[165] Cathcart, 2009: 120, 126, 140
[166] Cathcart, 2009: 130
[167] Cathcart, 2009: 177
[168] Lion & Michel, 2009
[169] Lion & Michel, 2009: 90

Competing Individuals: The Heroic Scholar

As well as national pride, personal pride and distinction was of course also at stake with the successful decipherment of both hieroglyphs and cuneiform. In many ways this was all the more important to those working on them.

Champollion's groundbreaking work on hieroglyphs, *Lettré à M. Dacier,* was published in 1822, based on a paper he had read to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris, in September 1822[170]. Coincidentally, Young had actually been present when this paper was read, on one of his rare trips to France. It was in response to this work that Young published; *An Account of Some Recent Discoveries in Hieroglyphical Literature and Egyptian Antiquities* in 1823. As well as setting out his own contributions and theories, Young also makes his feelings about Champollion clear:

> "But, however Mr. Champollion may have arrived at his conclusions, I admit them, with the greatest pleasure and gratitude, not by any means as superseding my system, but as fully confirming and extending it[171]"

In case his feelings were not clear enough the publication is in fact subtitled *Including the Author's Original Alphabet, as Extended by Mr. Champollion*. This is in contrast to the recent publication of Champollion's letters which were subtitled by the editors *How One Man Solved the Mysteries of the Nile*[172], showing how the modern world prefers to perceive the decipherment of hieroglyphs as the heroic achievement of one individual. Champollion would have almost certainly been pleased by this, as he liked to project an image of being a lone genius working on his own and making all the breakthroughs himself. Indeed he was so well known for this tendency that his former teacher, the renowned linguist Silvestre de Sacy, wrote a letter to Young warning him not to communicate too much of his work to Champollion as he might plagiarise it[173].

It is often argued that Young was very bitter about Champollion's achievements and it is suggested that he spent a lot of time and effort trying to persuade the academic community that they were not as great as they

[170] Adkins & Adkins, 2000: 185
[171] Young, 1823: 46
[172] Champollion, 2001
[173] Robinson, 2006: 158f

seemed. This, I would argue, is fundamentally wrong and misunderstands Young's personality and motivations. As mentioned above, Young was both active and well respected in many different fields and so unlike Champollion his reputation did not solely rely upon being named the decipherer of hieroglyphs. Young in fact seems to have been willing to give Champollion the credit for deciphering hieroglyphs but his main point was that his own work, and anything that Champollion owed to it, should have been acknowledged. Young was always scrupulous about crediting other scholars in his academic papers and felt the same respect was due to him[174], explaining "I did certainly expect to find the chronology of my own researches a little more distinctly stated[175]". This, he explains, is one of the other reasons why he felt it necessary to publish *An Account…*

Young also explains that whilst he was in Paris in 1822, as well as attending Champollion's paper at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, he attended a paper given by Augustin-Jean Fresnel on optics. This, of course, was another area in which Young was both interested and academically active. In fact it is for this work that Young is most often remembered today. Fresnel's paper closely mirrored work that Young himself had done several years previously, which was not mentioned during the lecture. But when Young drew his attention to this earlier work Fresnel was careful to acknowledge it in the publication of the paper, and Young accepted that Fresnel had reached his conclusions independently[176]. It is clear from Young's words that he then considered the matter settled and became a strong supporter of Fresnel's work. This suggests that had Champollion acted with similar grace Young would have probably been satisfied and the debate would not have surfaced.

Up until the publication of *An Account….* Young and Champollion had maintained a cordial relationship. However Champollion clearly took great offence at it, and it marks the turning point in their relationship over hieroglyphs[177]. But, nevertheless, when Young turned his attentions to deciphering demotic Champollion, in his position of curator in the Louvre, was helpful in finding and showing Young the

[174] Robinson, 2006: 212
[175] Young, 1823: 43
[176] Young, 1823: 39
[177] Robinson, 2006: 219

materials he needed[178]. This is confirmed by Young's Demotic dictionary in which he is scrupulous about acknowledging this help[179].

The rivalries that influenced the decipherment of cuneiform were much more personal. Traditionally it is the soldier and socialite Sir Henry Rawlinson who is credited with the decipherment of cuneiform; certainly at the time it was a widely held view that he had accomplished it almost entirely on his own. Actually it was the combined efforts of Rawlinson and an Irish clergyman, Dr. Edward Hincks, that made the decipherment possible.

Rawlinson began his career in the East India Company army[180]. He was a competitive man and early on showed a great interest in the decipherment of ancient languages. He distinguished himself militarily in the first Anglo-Afghan war (1839-1842[181]) and in 1844 was made the British Consul at Baghdad. He chose this position despite being offered better paying and more powerful posts because of the access to cuneiform inscriptions it allowed him[182]. He returned to England permanently in 1855 and was knighted in 1856[183]. He was a long-term and influential member of The Royal Asiatic Society (RAS), the most important body for the study of the ancient Near East in Britain, as well as a well known and popular member of polite society.

Cuneiform was not the first script that Rawlinson attempted to decipher. He had first tried his hand at Old Persian. Rawlinson had been one of many who had worked on it and in 1839 whilst resident in Persia, he was working on the publication of his results when he received a letter from the scholar Christian Lassen, dated to the previous year, explaining that his decipherment of Old Persian had already been published. Rawlinson had to accept that whilst they had both independently deciphered the script Lassen had published his work first and so would receive the credit[184].

[178] Robinson, 2006: 230
[179] Adkins & Adkins, 2000: 277
[180] Rawlinson, 1882: 18
[181] Rawlinson, 1882: 71
[182] Adkins, 2003: 135
[183] Rawlinson, 1882: 202
[184] Adkins, 2003: 101-102

Hincks was very different to Rawlinson. He was a provincial Irish clergyman who spent nearly all of his career in his parish in the Irish countryside far from London, the centre of learning in Britain at the time. His most important publications were in Irish journals which meant that whilst he was well regarded in Ireland, few people in England had heard of him and those that had found it nearly impossible to access his work. This is shown by a letter in 1846 from Edwin Norris. Norris was a renowned scholar, prominent member of the RAS, and friend of Hincks, yet he wrote to him asking for a list of all his publications, saying that "I am as ignorant here [London] as Major Rawlinson in Baghdad"[185]. At the time Norris was probably in one of the best places in the world to consult scholarly publications and was aware of Hincks' work, yet even he had no access to much of it. Hincks seems to have been aware of this problem and was at first in frequent correspondence with the RAS until 1847 when they informed him that they would not be able to publish any of his work until they had completed the publication of Rawlinson's work[186]. This rather soured the relationship and in 1856 when Hincks was finally nominated for honorary membership to the RAS he actually asked a friend to "withdraw my name from the ballot". His friend failed to do so and to Hincks' apparent displeasure he was made an honorary member[187].

Alongside Norris, one of Hincks' few champions in London was Austen Henry Layard, who had excavated at Nineveh and Kalhu (Nimrud) in Iraq. This friendship seems to have been at least partly because of the problematic nature of Layard's relationship with Rawlinson who he felt, probably correctly, was not being open in sharing his progress in decipherment[188]. Through his influence Layard was able to secure Hincks a temporary position at the British Museum in 1853 in order to translate some of the inscriptions Layard had uncovered in his excavations. This infuriated Rawlinson. Although he had originally given his support to this scheme, it seems he felt that the preparation of this publication should have fallen to him[189]. He wrote letters to the Trustees of the British Museum, many of whom he knew personally, trying to lose Hincks the position and cause as much trouble for him as he could. His actions contributed to Hincks' work never

[185] Cathcart, 2007:154
[186] Adkins, 2003: 252
[187] Davidson, 1933: 195f
[188] Larsen, 1996: 304
[189] Larsen, 1996: 305

being published, and his time at the museum was both short and frustrating as the staff were quite unhelpful[190]. In fact, until it was finally archived in the British Museum Manuscript Department in 1861[191] the only person who seems to have actually seen Hincks' work at the museum was Rawlinson himself. Several months after Hincks finished his work Rawlinson arranged for one of his friends at the British Museum, William Vaux, to send him copies of the manuscripts. In the accompanying letter Vaux says that this was the first time anyone had looked at the notebooks since Hincks had left, and the archivist had at first even denied that they existed[192].

Despite this rivalry it would have been a lot harder for either man to decipher cuneiform without the work of the other. Hincks seems to have had the flashes of inspiration and breakthroughs that were necessary, whereas Rawlinson did more of the patient repetitive work with the inscriptions[193]. This may have been at least partly to do with their different positions. Hincks was often kept very busy, with the work of his parish leaving him little time to dedicate to his cuneiform studies. Rawlinson, particularly after he retired to England, had much more time and because of his position in Baghdad had access to a huge range of inscriptions that were simply not available to Hincks. This advantage was enhanced by Rawlinson's refusal to share this material with anyone else.

Returning to the report on the 1857 test of the decipherment of cuneiform at the RAS we find a passage explaining why the committee responsible for the comparison felt the different scholars had arrived at almost the same translations:

> "it is to be observed, that this agreement is in no doubt, in part at least, owing to their adoption of the values proposed by Sir Henry Rawlinson and Dr. Hincks. The agreement as regards the letters being established, it follows that significant terms will also be similarly read, and this may be assumed to be the case from the frequent correspondence in the passages of the translations[194]"

[190] Larsen, 1996: 334
[191] Cathcart, 2009: 102
[192] Larsen, 1996: 336
[193] Larsen, 1996: 303
[194] Fox Talbot et al, 1861: 156

It seems clear that the RAS is giving equal credit to both Rawlinson and Hincks for the decipherment. Yet despite this it was Rawlinson alone who was widely seen as being the decipherer of cuneiform.

This, I would argue, is because of Rawlinson's position in society and his influential friends. He was already known to the public as the man who was in the process of deciphering cuneiform and his lectures to the RAS on the subject had been well attended and widely reported. Whilst Hincks' own lecture in London had also received good reviews, he had only given one and it had been to The Royal Society of Literature[195], so had not attracted the attention of influential Near Eastern scholars. Rawlinson's articles were written in an easily accessible language and in publications that were much more widely available to the general public. In contrast, as Oppert wrote to Hincks, the Irishman "never wrote a paper intelligible to other than Assyriologists" and Oppert goes on to ask "who dear doctor, can have here the *Journal for Sacred Literature*?[196]" in reference to the obscure publications in which Hincks' work appeared. Rawlinson was a well liked and influential member of the RAS, in later life even serving as president of the society. Hincks was only been made an honorary member in 1856, just before the decipherment test, and then seemingly against his wishes. Finally, because of his military record, the positions he had held in his career, his residence in London, and the fact he seems to have generally been a friendly and outgoing man, Rawlinson was friends with many influential people, such as ambassadors, politicians and aristocrats. Hincks, however, spent the majority of his time in his parish in Ireland, and whilst he seems to have been popular with and even beloved by his parishioners, they were hardly in a position to champion his scholarly cause.

All of these factors meant that when the first excitement of the cuneiform competition died down it was Rawlinson who remained in the public consciousness, a situation he would not have wanted to change as he felt he deserved the recognition. This would have been exacerbated by the fact that he felt he had missed out on the credit for his work on Old Persian. Hincks was well aware that the public saw Rawlinson as the decipherer of cuneiform. Even in 1856, before the results of the decipherment test were made official, Hincks complained of this favouritism to Fox Talbot, saying about Rawlinson's translation of the Tiglath-

[195] Larsen, 1996: 225
[196] Cathcart, 2009: 141-2

Pileser cylinder:

> "I may have a laugh in private over any mistakes that I n**o**tice; but I will not enlighten the public in respect to them. The public has given its choice in favour of Sir Henry's exclusiveness and if it be deceived in consequence thereof, let it be so![197]"

This is the tone that Hincks usually takes when discussing Rawlinson in this period, showing his feelings both of bitterness and helplessness at the situation.

There is also a religious undercurrent in the story of the rivalry between Rawlinson and Hincks. As discussed above, Hincks was a vicar in the Irish Church. He was certainly a devout Christian, as well as a passionate and well liked clergyman who was very active in his parish. In a sermon his brother delivered the week after his death he made it clear that none of Hincks' discoveries "threw the slightest discredit upon any fact recorded in the Holy Scriptures: but on the contrary all tended to confirm the sacred record[198]". Indeed whilst he occasionally tried to move closer to London because of his work on cuneiform and other scholarly works, it seems he was hoping to find a parish in or around London, rather than quitting the church altogether[199].

Unusually for the time, Rawlinson does not seem to have been a practising Christian[200]. Although there is no outright statement of his religious feelings, or lack of them, it is hinted at in the memoir written by his younger brother George, who was a devout Christian and canon of Canterbury at the time he wrote:

> "Sir Henry may be said to have been a man of the highest principle. Not committed to the daily performance of those religious acts and practices which to many are the essentials of an upright life, he held the broad view of doing good because it was good[201]"

This memoir was certainly written for posterity and to honour Rawlinson's memory, and George was clearly in awe of his older brother so would not have written anything controversial. Atheism would certainly have been seen as a black mark against his name at the time but this passage and similar ones

197 Cathcart, 2008: 358
198 Davidson, 1933: 29
199 Davidson, 1933: 43
200 Larsen, 1996: 334
201 Rawlinson, 1882: 303

certainly suggest Christianity was not high on Rawlinson's list of priorities. It seems unlikely that such a devout Christian as George would have included these passages unless Henry's feelings on the subject were well known.

Although at the time Rawlinson and Hincks were working on the decipherment the Old Testament was seen as the most important source for the early history of the world there were other sources that could be used, namely the works of Greek and Roman authors. The problem was that these classics did not fit well with the biblical evidence. The main differences was the number of Assyrian dynasties thought to have existed. The biblical evidence was still using the chronology of James Ussher, discussed in Chapter One, which calculated c.1,500 years between the founding of Assyria and the next time the country is mentioned in the Old Testament. Thus it was believed that there were two main dynasties[202], the first containing the kings mentioned in the foundation story, and the second which, for example, campaigned at Lachish. The classical sources, however, implied that there was only one dynasty of Assyrian kings, and that the second dynasty of Assyrian kings mentioned in the Old Testament were merely Median vassals and not actually very important or powerful[203]. The classics also suggested that the Egyptian culture was older than the Mesopotamian, something that was in direct conflict with the Old Testament that stated life had started in Mesopotamia[204].

Hincks of course followed the Biblical tradition rather than the classical one, though he was happy to use the classical sources where they did not contradict the Old Testament. Rawlinson, however, seems to have prioritised the classics and spent a lot of time and energy trying to find evidence of the Assyrian kings mentioned in them rather than those mentioned in the Bible[205]. This did in fact hinder his work, for a long time he denied Hincks' claims that the palaces that Layard was uncovering in Mesopotamia were built by the Assyrian kings Sennacherib, Shalmaneser and Esarhaddon[206] mentioned in the Bible; this was later proved correct.

[202] Larsen, 1996: 167
[203] Larsen, 1996: 172
[204] Larsen, 1996: 172f, Genesis II: 10-14
[205] Larsen, 1996: 180
[206] Larsen, 1996: 296

It could be argued that Rawlinson focused on the classics rather than the Old Testament as he knew religion was an area that aroused strong feelings. Very few people would be outraged if he were to suggest or even show that the classical authors had been incorrect, but any suggestion against the accuracy of the Old Testament was likely to be taken very seriously by a great many people. However, I would argue this was not the case. When his brother George suggested that excavations in Mesopotamia should be stopped because of the Biblical associations, Rawlinson responded that this was "downright rot"[207]. This is not the response of someone who is trying to be diplomatic, it is the response of someone who is genuinely uninterested in how his work is perceived by the outside world. I would argue that the reason Rawlinson focused on the classics rather than the Old Testament is because he simply believed them to be the better sources. However, when he felt his work and reputation could be aided by the connection between Mesopotamia and the Bible he was happy to take advantage of it, as we have seen in the case of the Lachish reliefs.

Conclusion

It is clear from both stories of decipherment that there was massive rivalry between those undertaking it. However, despite this it is unlikely that any of the major players would have been able to complete the decipherment without contributions by other people. Although Champollion was unwilling to admit it, his work was almost certainly influenced by that of a great many people. Several of his teachers as a boy and young man had been or were active in the decipherment of hieroglyphs and this must have had an influence on his work, as he knew from an early age that he wanted to be the person who deciphered hieroglyphs. His consistent denial that he owed anything to Thomas Young or other contemporary scholars must be seen as false. Even if he did not consciously follow their ideas he would have read and absorbed their work and it must have influenced him to some extent.

The men who deciphered cuneiform indulged in petty arguments and jealousies, and could endlessly debate who first discovered each small part of the story. There is little evidence of direct collaboration. Hincks

[207] Larsen, 1996: 171

corresponded with both Oppert and Fox Talbot, but there are no known letters between Hincks and Rawlinson, and they are only definitely known to have met twice, in 1850. However, despite the disagreements and competition all of them recognised that they were indebted to the other scholars on at least some points, and that realistically the decipherment of cuneiform had been a collaborative effort. Yet in the public mind it is Rawlinson who has usually been seen as the decipherer of cuneiform, due to his social standing and popularity at the time.

It seems that for posterity it was not simply carrying out the work of decipherment that was crucial, it was also just as important to make other scholars and the public aware of what you had done. Champollion was well known amongst other French scholars for his passionate study of Egyptian languages and his desire to decipher hieroglyphs. This meant that whilst there were some who did not at first believe that Champollion had deciphered hieroglyphs there were many others who did, and they were willing to back his claim. Once the French public came to believe in Champollion's work his cause was as good as won. For Young, however, hieroglyphs was just one of many different areas he was interested and active in. Although his work on the subject was known to English scholars it was not what they primarily knew him for, and because of his habit of publishing his work anonymously the public had little or no idea that he was working on the subject. Thus when he made his claims to primacy in certain aspects of the decipherment he did not have a large or influential group of people ready to back his claims.

Likewise, with cuneiform, Rawlinson was well known amongst academics, the elite, and the general public as the man who was trying to decipher cuneiform. He gave frequent public lectures on his work and progress, authored many articles in publications with a wide audience, and his work was feted by the press in more popular publications such as *The Athenaeum*. Hincks had none of these advantages. Although other Near Eastern scholars were aware of his work, many people were not. He published in obscure journals, and when he did give lectures they were to less popular bodies and poorly attended by the general public. So once the first flush of excitement over the decipherment of cuneiform died down it was Rawlinson who was remembered and Hincks' work was almost forgotten. It seems that in the long run it is the perception of outsiders that is most important in deciding who gets the credit for the achievements of decipherment.

Whoever academics who study the subject may give the honour to, if the popular opinion awards the credit to someone else then that is the person who is named as decipherer.

The Debate about the "Birthplace of Writing"

Which region was the first to invent writing, Egypt or Mesopotamia? This question has caused serious debate between Sumerologists and Egyptologists for almost as long as the disciplines have existed. From 1928, with the discovery of the first Uruk IV tablets[208], the earliest known cuneiform documents, it seemed for a long time as if the evidence pointed towards Mesopotamia as the birthplace of writing. However, since 1977[209] discoveries at Abydos in Egypt have pushed back the date of the earliest attested writing in Egypt so that it is almost contemporary with Mesopotamia. In this section we will look at the earliest evidence of writing from both regions and the main interpretations that have been put on them.

The Candidates

Writing is generally agreed to have started entirely independently on a finite number of occasions, while all other writing systems are argued to have been influenced by one of these original scripts. The precise list of regions where scripts were independently invented is debated, but is usually agreed to include Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and South America (Maya)[210]. Although believed to have been begun without stimulus from outside, both Chinese and Mayan writing have both been proven to postdate the invention of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Thus the debate over which area first used writing focuses on Egypt and Mesopotamia. In this section we will review the main evidence for the earliest known writing in both regions, and the main interpretations that have been put on them. We will also look at the radio-carbon dating tests that have been used to try and establish exactly when these artefacts were made.

Southern Mesopotamia: Uruk

The earliest writing from Mesopotamia comes from the site of the Eanna, the temple of the goddess Inanna

[208] Nissen, 1986: 317
[209] http://www.dainst.org/en/project/abydos?ft=all
[210] See e.g. Chrisomalis, 2009: 62, Daniels 1992: 8, 1996:2

in Uruk, in the form of tablets found in several deposits in different areas of the site. The tablets were excavated from stratum IV of the archaeological sequence observed at the Eanna (and are therefore known as the Uruk IV tablets) and on this basis were dated to c.3300BC. Precise dating was at first unsure as these tablets were found in secondary deposits, namely rubbish dumps, rather than their original context. However in the 1963-4 season seven tablets were found on the floor of the Red Temple mixed together with the remains of the roof construction. As the roof was made of wood it could be dated using carbon-14 dating, and the tablets could be dated to the same time as the roof, Uruk-Eanna level IV a or b, c.3400-3300BC[211]. This dating has been accepted for the entire group of tablets.

The Uruk IV tablets are very poorly understood; the earliest tablets that we can read are from the subsequent Uruk III period. The Uruk IV tablets contain signs that have been interpreted as numeric alongside those thought to be pictograms. Although attempts have been made to read these tablets they remain educated guesses. It is unclear what language the texts are written in. Although the Uruk III tablets are in Sumerian this is no guarantee that the earlier tablets are in the same language. There is also little or no grammatical information noted, so even if the pictograms could be deciphered there are numerous ways the information could be grammatically linked and understood. It is also impossible to make sense of the numeric system. We know that in the Uruk III period 13 different numeric systems were in use[212], each one used to count different commodities. This tells us that the inhabitants of the region did not use abstract counting in the Uruk III period so it is unlikely that they would have used it in the earlier Uruk IV period. Thus there could be innumerable numeric systems represented on the Uruk IV tablets and there is, for us, no certain way of knowing what system is being used on any particular tablet.

Although we cannot actually read the Uruk IV tablets, analysis suggests they record similar information to the Uruk III tablets. Of the Uruk III tablets, about 85% are administrative documents recording the movement of goods in and out of the temple including transactions such as the payment of rations to workers. The other 15% are lexical lists[213], which list all of the terms in a particular category, such as job

[211] Glassner, 2003: 39
[212] Green & Nissen, 1987: 117-166
[213] Larsen, 1988: 182

titles or trees, in an order often determined by the signs used to form the words. These lists have been interpreted as teaching aides that were used in scribal schools to help students learn how to write[214] and will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

Egypt: Abydos

The evidence from Egypt is more complicated than that from Mesopotamia. The first appearance of the hieroglyphic writing system in Egypt dates to the start of Dynasty 1, c. 2900BC. Until quite recently, little thought had been given to the origins and precursors to writing in Egypt. Even in the mid 1990s it was still simply accepted that "hieroglyphs came into existence, virtually fully developed[215]", despite the fact that this would be very unusual for a writing system. It was usually argued that as the Egyptian state formed the administration became more complex and so a recording system was developed to facilitate this[216]. What stages had led to this development were unknown as the evidence was simply not there in the archaeological record.

The possible evidence for the earlier development of the script has recently come to light. Working in cemetery U at Abydos in Upper Egypt, a team of archaeologists of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI) have uncovered the Pre-Dynastic tomb U-j (Fig. 2.2). Tomb U-j is the largest tomb in the cemetery, measuring 9.10m x 7.30m, and is split into 12 chambers. It has a brick-lining about 1.55m thick, and its top layer is roughly 0.5m below the modern ground level. The tomb seems to have been built in two separate phases, with the main burial chamber and nine smaller chambers built first and the two large chambers to the south (11 & 12) added at a later date[217]. Because of its size and complexity in comparison to the other graves in the cemetery it has been interpreted by the excavators as an elite burial place.

[214] Glassner, 2003: 99
[215] Robinson, 1995: 93
[216] Bard, 1992: 300
[217] Dreyer, 1992: 295

Figure 2.2 - Plan of Tomb U-j, Abydos

Evidence for three types of recording system has been discovered in tomb U-j. The first are sealings, clay stoppers originally fitted to storage jars covered with cylinder seal impressions. The second are storage jars which were found to have signs painted on the outside. The third are small bone and ivory tags with incised signs. These are thought to have originally been attached to grave goods of some kind. All three systems have the potential to be a precursor to the hieroglyphic writing system but because of the problems with the theories explaining how pot marks or cylinder seals would have led to writing (see Chapter Five), most scholars focus their attention on the third type of recording system found in U-j, the bone and ivory tags. Although there is still no clear development from these tags to hieroglyphs, the system of signs used here seems to be much more like a type of precursor and so is seen by many as the first evidence of writing in Egypt[218].

[218] See e.g. Wengrow, 2006; Baines, 1988, 2008; Regulski, 2008a; Trigger: 2004

158 of these inscribed tags were found in tomb U-j[219] (Fig. 2.3). They typically measure about 1.5 x 1.25 cm with a drilled hole in one corner, normally the top right, and bear inscriptions that were usually coloured in black after incision[220]. The tags were disturbed by tomb robbers in antiquity so cannot be definitively related to any of the items left within the tomb. The excavator, Günter Dreyer, estimates that around 50 signs were used on the tags[221], though this is debatable as it is difficult to say which signs are unique and which are just executed in a different style. The signs are usually in pairs or alone, but also occur in small groups of three or four. Again it is difficult to give exact figures as deciding how many signs are depicted is often subjective. In addition many of the tags are broken so could be missing signs. The range of signs include, amongst other things, numeric signs, people, animals, birds, plants, buildings and ships[222]. The tags are often related to examples of inscribed bone and ivory tags from Dynasties 1 and 2, for example the "Label for king Den's sandals", also found at Abydos[223] (Fig. 2.4). The inscriptions on these later tags are much more complex, with a greater variety of signs, pictures and true hieroglyphs that give information such as details of goods, royal exploits and year names[224].

Figure 2.3 - Inscribed Tags From Tomb U-j, Abydos

[219] Dreyer, 1998: 113-134
[220] Baines, 2004: 154
[221] Baines, 2004: 157
[222] Dreyer, 1998: 183-187
[223] BM 55586, Russmann, 2001: 2, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=109824&partid=1&searchText=ivory+label+den&fromADBC=ad&toADBC=ad&numpages=10&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx&currentPage=1
[224] Wengrow, 2006: 204

Figure 2.4 - Label From King Den's Sandals

It should be noted that whilst it is usually assumed or implied that these Pre-Dynastic tags are only found in tomb U-j, this is in fact not correct. Whilst the majority certainly are, Dreyer's site report for Umm el-Qa'ab, the area containing the Pre-Dynastic cemetery U and the Early Dynastic cemetery B, states that six tags were found in tomb U-i, five in U-k, two in U-qq, one in U-e and one in U-o[225]. There is also a group of ten tags that were discovered in earlier excavations carried out throughout Abydos by Flinders Petrie and Émile Amélineau. However their poor documentation means we only know in which graveyards they were found and nothing more specific. Of these, eight tags were found in graveyard B, one in graveyard U, and the final one was possibly also from graveyard U[226]. Thus eight of them are certainly not from U-j. Although tomb U-j is still clearly where the majority of tags come from it should be kept in mind that this is not exclusive. The evidence shows that the use of these tags was more widespread than is often suggested. However, both cemeteries have been excavated and refilled numerous times, including by the ancient Egyptians themselves, and this may have led to some of the tags being moved from their original context.

[225] Dreyer, 1998: 113-134
[226] Dreyer, 1998: 134-136

So far the sign system used on the tags has not been deciphered, although several theories have been put forward as to what they record. It is now generally agreed that the inscriptions on the tags represent various toponyms because the limited number of signs is thought to be too small to show personal names. Dreyer claims to have gained some information from them, such as names of administrative institutes and royal estates, as well as place names including the cities of Buto and Bubastis in the Nile Delta[227], but this is debatable as his reasoning is based on the later dynastic system of hieroglyphs. From the number of signs used across the range of tags it seems reasonable to assume that they are recording names of some kind as it seems that there are not enough signs being used to give details of the products[228]. But this is problematic as there is a lack of grammatical elements, particularly the genitive, so even if the signs 'plantation' and 'Elephantine' could definitely be read, there is still no evidence that the meaning is 'plantation <u>of</u> Elephantine'. There are other ways these two words could be interpreted[229]; 'plantation near Elephantine', 'plantation of the man from Elephantine', 'plantation of Mr. Elephantine', and so on. Of course, even if we can prove that the tags contain names or toponyms it does not actually help us explain why the Egyptians thought this useful and necessary as there actually seems little point to these tags from a bureaucratic point of view. All the tags seem to be made in one place and administratively there seems little point in receiving goods, labelling who or where they are from, and then burying them in a tomb as once they are buried there is little need to know such information. This suggests that the mortuary function of these tags was key to their existence, indicating more of a ritual or ideologically motivated activity than administrative.

The Role of Radiocarbon Dating in the Debate

Two different analyses provide radiocarbon dates for Abydos tags by attempting to date tomb U-j from samples of wood found within it. The first study looked at samples from both U-j (wooden samples of the covering of chamber 6[230]) and Uruk (charcoal found within the Eanna precinct, from the burnt roof of Temple C[231]). The results dated the material from U-j slightly later than the Uruk IV tablets. In these tests the aim of the archaeologists was not to find absolute dates for the samples from Uruk and Abydos but to

[227] Dreyer, 1992: 297
[228] Baines, 2004: 164
[229] Regulski, 2008a: 990
[230] Boehmer, Dreyer & Kromer, 1993: 65
[231] Boehmer, Dreyer & Kromer, 1993: 67

gather data under the same conditions in the same laboratory to enable them to make a comparative dating[232]. The results were found to show conclusively "those from Abydos are definitely younger than those from Uruk"[233], with the dates from Uruk covering 3515-3410BC and the dates from tomb U-j 3375-3045BC[234]. These differences between the samples is clearly illustrated by the graph (Fig. 2.5), which shows that the samples from Uruk are older than all of the samples from Abydos.

Figure 2.5 - Graph of Date Ranges For Tomb U-j, Abydos and the Eanna Temple C, Uruk

The second study, however, dates the writing from Abydos nearly contemporaneous with the Uruk IV tablets with calibrated radiocarbon dates of 3350-2900 BC and 3500-3100 BC for samples taken from the roof beams of chamber 6 in U-j[235]. I find it very interesting that both of these tests were carried out, as it seems to me that the analysis was repeated because the first tests did not come up with the results the initiators, the archaeologists who worked at Abydos, had hoped for. This evidence was meant to be the proof that writing began in Egypt before Mesopotamia, the final answer to an argument that has been going on for decades. When this turned out not to be the case the same team of archaeologists carried out new tests and published the results in the same journal, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*

[232] Boehmer, Dreyer & Kromer, 1993: 63
[233] Boehmer, Dreyer & Kromer, 1993: 68
[234] Boehmer, Dreyer & Kromer, 1993: 64
[235] Gösdorf, Dreyer & Hartung, 1998: 173

Abteilung Kairo, yet the results that placed the Uruk material before that from Abydos were published in German and the results that judged the Abydos material at least as old as the Uruk samples were published in English. This means the results placing the Egyptian evidence at the same time as the Mesopotamian evidence is available to a much larger audience as English is more widely read than German, and, as German academics, the authors would have been well aware of this fact.

The differences in technique are also quite telling. In the original test samples from both Uruk and Abydos were examined in the same manner, by the same people, in the same laboratory, and the results were then compared. In the second test only two samples from tomb U-j were examined alongside samples from several other tombs at Abydos but not with samples from Uruk; this is clearly not a fair test. For these reasons I argue that the second test should be ignored and that the results of the original tests are the only viable ones from the evidence that is currently available to us. This gives us a date of somewhere between 3350-3050BC for tomb U-j. However, conventional chronologies place the beginning of Dynasty 1 at around 2900BC so it is not likely to be towards the latter end of the range as we know from other evidence that a more fully developed form of writing was in use by then.

It should also be noted that whilst the original test results do seem to prove conclusively that writing was practised in southern Mesopotamia (Uruk) before Egypt (Abydos), this is not necessarily the case. First, it is almost certain that we do not actually have the first ever written material from either of these areas, so it is in fact two arbitrary points in the development of writing that are being compared rather than the first ever writing. It also assumes that the evidence from U-j is definitely a precursor to the hieroglyphic script, something that has not in fact been demonstrated. As well as this the difference in dates is simply not great enough to state categorically which came first. Radiocarbon dating cannot give exact dates for samples that are this old. This is particularly true for the Egyptian evidence as it has been recognised that the calibration curves used for the Pre-Dynastic period are problematic, with "important fluctuations with long possible data ranges as a consequence[236]". These tests can only give an estimate and so the two dates may be much closer together, or further apart, than they would seem.

[236] Hendrickx, 2006: 90

Conclusion

As with the debate surrounding who deciphered hieroglyphs and cuneiform, the debate surrounding which region was the first to begin writing has degenerated into a competition, this time between different disciplines. This leads one to wonder why it is thought by so many to be important to establish whether writing is first attested in Egypt or Mesopotamia. There is an idea of prestige involved here. As discussed in Chapter One we live in a society where writing is intrinsically bound up with the idea of civilisation, and whatever civilisation may be defined as it is seen as a positive thing linked to the highest achievements of mankind. There seems to be a desire amongst academics for 'their' culture, or rather the one they have dedicated their lives to studying, to be seen as the first ever civilised society as if in some way this gives them greater prestige. Claiming that writing originates in one place or another has thus become a way of showing the importance and worth of that culture and the academic disciplines devoted to it.

Of course, from an objective point of view there seems little value in continuing this argument. It is unlikely that it will ever be settled conclusively as it is almost impossible to imagine what piece of evidence could do so. Even if the question was somehow decided it is still difficult to see what difference this would actually make to scholarship apart from a few fairly obscure chronological points. After all, no-one today would seriously argue that the writing systems of Mesopotamia and Egypt, as different as they so obviously are, are linked in their origins. Concluding this problem would still leave all of the questions of how, why and what effect writing had unanswered. It seems clear to me that this debate should be shelved and attention instead be focused on the numerous other issues that surround early writing.

All parts of the debate over the birth of writing have the ability to cause controversy, whether this be a scholarly debate over dating, or a more personal debate over individuals and reputations. This ability to arouse dispute shows the importance that is placed on the subject. People do not argue over things that have no significance to them. There is usually little point to the arguments that have arisen over the birth of writing other than reputation and esteem. Although the origins of other achievements of civilisation are occasionally debated, such as the first region to begin farming, these arguments are as a rule much less

heated.

In this section we have examined some of the key modern theories on the role of early writing. In Chapter One we saw that writing is usually identified with civilisation. In this chapter we have seen that in the modern world it is also inextricably linked with prestige. These points of view, I would argue, are linked. The concept of 'civilisation', however it is defined, is certainly seen as a prestigious one; anything associated with 'civilisation', such as writing, also has these prestige conferred upon it. For modern scholars writing seems to have an innate ability to stir passion in a way that other things do not. However, were these also the concerns of the ancient people who actually first used writing? This is what we will investigate in the rest of this study, starting in Section B with the direct evidence from both Egypt and Mesopotamia found in their religious beliefs and literary works, and examining the other technologies with which writing was associated. By doing this we will begin to understand whether or not modern and ancient views on the role of early writing are compatible, and if we need to review the way in which we understand early writing.

Section B: Views from Within Egypt and Mesopotamia

In this section we will begin to examine the ancient views of early writing, from the perspective of society as a whole. More individual responses to writing will be studied in Section C. We will begin in Chapter Three by looking at the gods of writing from both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Both regions had patrons of writing and scribes, and in both regions the identity of this deity changed over time as the use and role of writing developed. I see gods as the creations of humans and as representations of how the world and society was thought to function, or at least how it was supposed to function. Thus by understanding how the idealised scribes were thought to function we begin to understand the role which early writing played in ancient societies.

Chapter Four will examine the literature from both regions which discusses writing and professional scribes. This will include stories that tell us about the origins of writing, as well as stories that give us an understanding of the perceived power of writing, and stories that concern scribal life and education. As the only written evidence for ancient views on writing this is crucial evidence for this study. It should be noted, however, that none of these stories have writing as their central focus. Instead it is merely one aspect of the ideas these stories are examining. This is at odds with modern scholarship that centres entirely writing. It should also be remembered that this literature was created by literates, and so may not reflect the views of non-literates.

In Chapter Five we will look at other areas with which writing may have been associated. In the modern world writing has become so entrenched that we do not tend to think about what it is and how it may be connected to other technologies. However, in the ancient world, when writing was still 'new', these connections and links were still in their formative stages, and there were no such preconceptions. Examining early writing in the context of other contemporary recording systems and as a creative tool will help us to put writing in the context which it was viewed by ancient people. As we shall see, this is crucial if we are to gain a true understanding of the ancient views of early writing.

Chapter 3 – Divine Patrons of Writing: The Gods as Ideal Scribes

In Mesopotamia the goddess Nisaba and later the god Nabu were worshipped as the patrons of scribes. In Egypt the gods of writing were Seschat and Thoth, patron and inventor of writing respectively. Humans created these gods and gave them their attributes, based on what the humans believed that a scribe, for example, should be like. By looking at these gods as representative of the perfect human scribe we can gain an understanding of the perceived role and functions of scribes and writing within society. To date no systematic study of the gods of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia has been carried out. For most of the gods there are no in depth studies of their roles and attributes. Nisaba has not been studied in any depth. The only book-length study on Nabu was published in 1978[237], and no systematic research has been carried out more recently. Although there is a work on Seschat by Dagmar Budde (2000), it focuses on her role in the Graeco-Roman period, only discussing the earlier periods as background information. Whilst there have been several works on Thoth published, many focus on the Graeco-Roman Hermes Trismegistos or look into aspects other than his connection with writing, few of which are particularly suited to this study. The following discussion takes its departure from the relevant entries in the encyclopaedias of Egypt and Mesopotamia (*Reallexikon der Assyriologie* and *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*), drawing on the literary sources and archaeological artefacts that are dedicated to or mention these gods.

In this chapter we will begin by looking at the Mesopotamian goddess Nisaba. We will then look at Nabu who usurped her role as patron of scribes in the first half of the second millennium BC and examine the reasons why this may have happened. We will then turn our attention to Egypt and focus on Seschat, highlighting that despite certain striking similarities there are also areas where the Egyptian goddess diverges from the Mesopotamian ideals. Next we will study Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom who later became the Egyptian patron of scribes, to see how his role relates to that of Seschat and to explore possible

[237] Pomponio: 1978

parallels with Nabu. Finally we will briefly discuss Enki, the Mesopotamian god of wisdom, and as we will see in Chapter Four, is often a key character in the Mesopotamian literature that deals with writing.

The Goddess Nisaba

Nisaba was the first patron goddess of writing, accounting and scribes in ancient Mesopotamia, a role she is attested in soon after the invention of writing (c.3300BC). Nisaba was originally a grain goddess, so we see her name written using a pictograph representing an ear of grain[238] (Fig. 3.1). Although writing does for a time overshadow the original role of Nisaba, agriculture is always considered to be an important aspect of her character by the Mesopotamians. This agricultural aspect of Nisaba is therefore found in poems and texts such as the *Hymn to Nisaba*. The composition survives in 12 copies, though some are fragmentary. Most of the tablets come from the city of Ur, others from Nippur; the oldest extant copy dates back to the Ur III period[239] (c.2112-2004BC), a time when Nisaba's link to writing was fully established. The hymn praises Nisaba and gives us information about her different aspects and roles. As well as various references to her scribal connection, lines 14-20 say:

> "In order to make barley and flax grow in the furrows, so that excellent corn can be admired.... in her great princely role she has cleansed her body and has put the holy priestly garment on her torso.[240]"

This clearly links Nisaba to the growth of cereal crops, showing her relation to agriculture was still a prominent aspect of her character over a thousand years after she had been assigned the patronage of writing and scribal practice.

The two different aspects of Nisaba are also stressed in copies of the god list An: *Anu ša ameli* (l. 97-98), where she is given two names:

97 ^{d}ŠE NÁG ^{d}nissaba (ŠE NÁG) šá né-me-qí (- 'of wisdom')

98 ^{d}ha-a-a ^{d}nissaba (ŠE NÁG) šá maš-re-e (- 'of wealth')

[238] Black & Green, 1992: 143
[239] ETCSL 4.16.1
[240] Black et al, 2004: 293 (lines 14-20)

The first column lists the name in Sumerian, the second column the name in Akkadian, and the final column the god's area of influence. The two names of Nisaba relate to her two main areas of responsibility; wisdom refers to her role as patron of scribes and the scribal arts, and wealth refers to her links with agriculture and grain[241], the basis for the Sumerian economy.

Figure 3.1 - Cuneiform Sign For Nisaba

It was this agricultural role that led Nisaba to be cast as the goddess of writing. The earliest written documents in Mesopotamia are agricultural accounts, and these contain mostly numerals. Nisaba's aspect as a grain goddess would obviously tie her in to this tradition of agricultural accounts but so does the fact that she is female. This link between women and counting may have originally been made because of the menstrual cycle which provides a simple way of measuring the passing of time for ancient societies that have few other temporal points of reference. This idea is backed up by the fact that in Mesopotamian scribal schools the title *dubsar ni sid* 'mathematics teacher' was interchangeable with the title *dubsar zaga* 'menstruation teacher'[242]. In Sumerian literature it seems that no male gods are ever linked to counting, measuring, and writing, but several different female goddesses are. In the story *Enlil & Sud* Enlil gives his bride Ninlil literacy and numeracy as a wedding gift. In *Inanna's Journey to the World of the Dead* when Inanna is slowly divested of her divine aspects while entering the world of the dead, the last things she gives up are the measuring 'reed and rope'[243]. It seems it was this dual role of grain and counting which were both found in Nisaba that led the Sumerians to make her the goddess of writing.

The measuring 'reed and rope' were very meaningful for the Mesopotamians as in monumental art they

[241] Weeden, 2009: 91
[242] Lucas, 1979: 313
[243] Robson, 2008: 118

were presented to the king by the gods as symbols of the kings justice[244]. Measuring fields was ultimately to calculate taxes and the measurements had to be accurate so that everyone was taxed fairly. The measuring tools therefore come to represent fairness and justice. In Sumerian literature it is always Nisaba who presents the king with these items, but other goddesses could assume the role depending on the context[245].

To specify the depiction of Nisaba in the Mesopotamian iconography is problematic. Stylistically it is very difficult to tell her apart from other vegetation goddesses and so there are no known depictions that can be linked to her with certainty[246]. The *Hymn to Nisaba* describes her as being "Lady, coloured like the stars of heaven[247]". In other texts she is said in to hold a lapis lazuli tablet in her lap, referred to as '*dub an.mul*', from which she can read the future through the omens[248]. She is also called 'granter of wisdom', in charge of the heavenly writings. These 'heavenly writings' are written in cuneiform with the signs 'mul'  'an'  which literally means "star of heaven" and it is thought that this is a metaphor for the stars as cuneiform signs[249]. The Mesopotamians believed that the gods wrote messages in the night sky, and these could be read as omens foretelling the future. However, although it is thought that this idea dates back to the earliest stages of Mesopotamian culture, there is no evidence of a written corpus of the signs and their interpretation until the Old Babylonian period[250]. If the tablet did indeed give Nisaba control over these omens it would underline the importance with which her role was seen.

Nisaba was known as the patron deity of the city Ereš[251], but its location has yet to be positively identified. Some scholars argue it should be identified with the site of Abu Salabikh[252]. This would be interesting as Abu Salabikh is where some of the earliest writing outside Uruk have been found, including literary, lexical

[244] Robson, 2008:120
[245] Robson, 2008: 121
[246] Braun-Holzinger, 1998-2001: 579
[247] Black et al, 2004: 293 (lines 1-6)
[248] Rochberg, 2004: 64
[249] Michalowski, 1998-2001: 577
[250] Rochberg, 2004: 64
[251] Michalowski, 1998-2001: 576
[252] Postgate & Moorey, 1976: 161

and administrative texts[253]. Other scholars argue that the site of Ereš is the modern day site of Jarin[254]. In fact the evidence for both sites is inconclusive, though the more southerly site of Jarin is slightly more likely[255]. Whether Ereš is located at Jarin or Abu Salabikh, no temples dedicated to Nisaba have been found at these sites or indeed elsewhere in Mesopotamia. It seems that at some point after the Ur III period the city or Ereš was abandoned and the cults transferred to Nippur[256], possibly because the Euphrates river had changed course and left Ereš without a water supply. There is some evidence that Nisaba's cult was active in Nippur in the Ur III period[257] (c. 2112-2004BC), though she may have only been worshipped in the temple of her daughter Ninlil[258].

By the Old Babylonian period the Akkadian language had effectively replaced Sumerian as the language of administration[259], and this is also reflected in cultural changes. One of the changes concerns the attributes of writing and counting which are now assigned to a male god; Nisaba's role as patron of scribes was usurped by the god Nabu. From this time Nisaba no longer appears in the contemporary literature in association with writing. We only have records of her in the Old Babylonian corpus because there is still a tradition of copying the older Sumerian texts. We can see that this usurpation has happened by looking at the god lists from different periods. Nisaba appears in the Early Dynastic (mid-third millennium) god lists from Fara and Abu Salabikh[260]. These are some of the earliest extant written records of this kind, and the high position she is given in them shows the level of respect she commanded. If Abu Salabikh were indeed Ereš this may not demonstrate a high level of respect for Nisaba throughout Mesopotamia as it would be customary for a city to give increased prominence to its patron deity. However, it seems unlikely that this would be the case as these god lists seem to have been standardised across Sumer by this time. By the Old Babylonian period we find that Nisaba is no longer being placed among the top ranking gods[261]; she is in the lower ranks and never regains her earlier prominent position. From this time Nisaba reverts back to her

253 Charvat, 2002: 165
254 Jacobsen, 1960: 176
255 Steinkeller, 2003: 631
256 Michalowski, 1998-2001: 576
257 Sallaberger, 1993: 100-101
258 Michalowski, 1998-2001: 578
259 Michalowski, 2008: 8
260 Michalowski, 1998-2001: 577
261 Michalowski, 1998-2001: 578

role as grain goddess only and is never again linked to writing.

When Nabu takes over the role of scribal patron he also becomes Nisaba's consort, probably because of the mutual association with scribal activities[262] but also possibly as a way of rationalising this transference of roles. However, from at least the Old Babylonian period Nisaba's consort was also said to be Haia, the god of seals[263], a link almost certainly made because of the relevance of both gods to administrative activity. It has been argued by Mark Weeden that Haia's name may be linked to one of the Akkadian words for grain, *e(y)yû(m).* Weeden argues that both Haia's name and the stem for the word grain *e(yy)u* can be derived from the West Semitic root **hyy* (life)[264], which may suggest that Haia is linked to grain, just as Nisaba is. However, although this connection works linguistically, part of the argument in its favour is based on the fact that Haia was the husband of Nisaba who is well attested as a grain goddess. This is thought to make it more likely that Haia was also linked to grain. Although it is quite usual for gods to be paired because of mutual interests they very rarely represent all of the same things and so it is problematic to say that because Nisaba was linked to grain Haia was as well, especially as there is no evidence of Haia being linked to grain independent of his connection to Nisaba in the 3rd millennium sources[265].

We learn more about Haia's attributes from the *Hymn to Haia for Rim-Sin*, found on two tablets from Ur dating to the reign of Rim-Sin of Larsa[266] (c.1822-1763). This composition exalts Haia and concludes with a section asking him to bless Rim-Sin in return for his worship[267]. Amongst his attributes we find him described as accountant of *hal-an-kug*, a place associated with Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom (see below), and:

> "palace archivist of heaven and earth, who keeps count of every single assignment, who holds a holy reed-stylus and covers the great tablets of destiny with writing![268]"

[262] Black & Green, 1992: 182
[263] Black et al, 2004: 296, l.29-38
[264] Weeden, 2009: 103
[265] Weeden, 2009: 95
[266] Charpin, 1986: 34
[267] Black et al, 2004: 294
[268] Black et al, 2004: 295 (lines 1-8)

He is also said to be the "seal-holder of father Enlil[269]", a role that again closely links him to the administration of the gods. As we have seen these are all areas that closely correspond to the roles assigned to Nisaba: accounting, administration, recording, and the tablets of destiny.

Haia is also linked to the foundation and building of temples, being given epithets such as: "holding in his hands the holy divine plans of the temple of Eridug[270]", " planner (?) who artfully excavates (?) the soil of the Land, who decorates the floor and makes the dining hall attractive[271]", " who mark[s] out the cult places[272]". As well as the clear links with Nisaba, who as we have seen was very much concerned with measuring and planning, these tributes are also similar to the Egyptian goddess Seschat (see below) who was given a central role in the building of temples by the Egyptians. Haia is also said to be "Interpreter of the obscurity of Enlil's (?) words, skilful one who steers the august princely divine powers[273]". This is similar to the role that Thoth plays in the Egyptian pantheon (see below), who both advises the creator god and makes sure his will is carried out.

The God Nabu

Nabu, like most male Mesopotamian gods, is depicted in the iconography as a human with the long beard and hairstyle worn only by the kings and the gods, and a full length robe that shows his high status (Fig. 3.2). His symbol was a single wedge-shaped instrument, either vertical or horizontal, that is sometimes shown resting on a tablet and is usually interpreted as a stylus[274]. When he is first found in the Mesopotamian pantheon he is a part of the court of Marduk, the city god of Babylon, where he fulfils the roles of vizier and scribe[275], but he is also referred to as Marduk's son and crown prince. Marduk was the patron god of Babylon, and as the city grew in prominence so Marduk became the supreme Mesopotamian god. It is presumably because of Nabu's roles as scribe and vizier of Marduk that he takes on the role of

[269] Black et al, 2004: 295 (lines 1-8)
[270] Black et al, 2004: 295 (lines 9-20)
[271] Black et al, 2004: 295 (lines 21-8)
[272] Black et al, 2004: 296 (lines 29-38)
[273] Black et al, 2004: 295 (lines 9-20)
[274] Green & Black, 1992:134
[275] Pomponio, 1998-2001: 21

god of writing and patron of scribes. Nabu's rise in prominence coincides with the political fortunes of Babylon that made it the centre of what is today southern Iraq during the rule of the Hammurabi dynasty.

Figure 3.2 – The God Nabu

That one god would take over the role previously assigned to another deity was not unusual during the transition from Sumerophone to Akkadophone culture when the Mesopotamian pantheon became reconciled. However this is the only known case in which a male god takes on the role of a female goddess. Nisaba's role is not the only one that Nabu usurps; later he becomes known, for example, as a god of wisdom, the first explicit reference to him as such dating to the Kassite period[276] (1595-1155BC). However although he is certainly *a* god of wisdom, he is never considered to be *the* god of wisdom. The Mesopotamian tradition already worshipped Enki as the god of wisdom (see below), and it could be that the association of Nabu with wisdom comes from the southern Babylonian tradition that made him part of Enki's family[277]. Although, as we will see in Chapter Four, in some traditions it is through Enki that mankind acquires the skill of writing he is never seen specifically as a god of writing or patron of scribes.

[276] Pomponio, 1998-2001:18
[277] Pomponio, 1998-2201:18

Over time Nabu's power continued to grow. When the New Year's festivals at Babylon were held in the first millennium, part of the ritual involved bringing Nabu's statue from his main temple in nearby Borsippa to visit Marduk in his temple in Babylon[278]. These were the two most important temples in Babylonia and as this festival was of fundamental importance to the Babylonians it suggests he had achieved a very high level of respect. By the first millennium, Nabu was considered co-ruler of the world alongside Marduk[279].

From the late Old Babylonian period onwards Mesopotamian scribes honoured Nabu as their patron. The spread of his cult throughout Mesopotamia can be seen by the large number of seals that refer to the owner as a "servant of Nabu". As seals are very closely tied to administration this suggests that it is the scribes and bureaucrats of the Babylonian state of the Hammurabi dynasty that are linking themselves to Nabu. There are also large numbers of theophoric personal names relating to Nabu found throughout Babylonia during this period[280], highlighting the rise in prominence of his cult and the increase in importance his role was being given. As well as showing their devotion to Nabu through their names and seals, scribes also deposited perfectly written tablets before him in his various temples[281] as a votive offering, proving his role as patron of scribes. However, despite Nabu's association with writing, he is not related to writing or the scribal arts in any of the extant myths, unlike Nisaba[282]. This is because the extant literature involving writing was composed long before the time when Nabu was given the role of patron of writing.

Nabu's temples are known as *Ezida,* which can be translated as "House of Legitimacy" or "House of Faith". Two *Ezidas* have been so far discovered and excavated, at Borsippa, near Babylon, and Kalhu (Nimrud) in Assyria. The temple discovered at Kalhu was built in the 9th century BC and arranged around two large rectangular courtyards[283], it contains a shrine to Nabu as well as a second one attributed to his

[278] Waerzeggers, 2010: 119
[279] Pomponio, 1998-2001: 17
[280] Pomponio, 1998-2001: 18
[281] Oppenheim, 1977: 242
[282] Black & Green, 1992: 133
[283] Oates & Oates, 2001: 111

wife Tashmetum[284]. The main gate to the temple complex was found to be flanked by recesses containing large statues of *apkallu*s [285] (fish-men). These are mythical beings who served Enki and were thought to have passed his knowledge, including writing, onto humanity (see Chapter Four). Because the temple contains no other references to Enki it is thought by the excavators that these statues were simply apotropaic[286].

There are other explanations however. The presence of the *apkallu* may be a reference to the fact that Nabu was originally thought to be a member of Enki's family. Although Enki himself may not be present in the temple, the connection might be strong enough for his servants to also serve his family members. Another option is that it is linked to the idea of the *apkallu* as advisors to the king. The first *apkallu* to come to earth was said to be Oannes. According to the *Uruk List of Kings and Sages* Oannes (also known as Adapa[287]) was an advisor to the king, and from then on each of the pre-flood kings had a different *apkallu* as an advisor[288]. The tradition of the king's advisor continued after the flood, but from this time on the position was filled by humans[289]. As we saw earlier Nabu was portrayed by the Mesopotamians as Marduk's vizier and chief advisor and so he may have been linked to the fish creatures in this capacity.

One of the rooms in the Kalhu temple (NT12) was found to contain a large number of clay tablets and a small well, and had an extra wide doorway. All of these factors indicate that it was built for the production and use of clay tablets as the extra wide doorway would have let in more light, a necessity when working with clay tablets, and the well could have been used to keep the clay moist while the tablets were being worked[290]. This room is positioned directly opposite the sanctuary room of Nabu cella, so when the doors to his shrine were open his statue would have been watching the scribes at work (Fig. 3.3). Although most temple complexes would have had an area where tablets were being made and used by the temple administration this is an unusually prominent position, reinforcing the link between Nabu and writing. A

[284] Oates & Oates, 2001: 113
[285] Oates & Oates, 2001: 111
[286] Green, 1986: 26
[287] Izre'el, 2001: 4
[288] Lenzi, 2008: 140-142
[289] Lenzi, 2008: 143
[290] Oates & Oates, 2001: 115

separate room has been designated as the store room for the archive, though disturbance in antiquity makes it difficult to be certain[291].

Figure 3.3 - Plan of the Ezida at Kalhu

There are also temples in Ashur and Babylon dedicated to *Nabu-ša-Hare*. It has been argued that this name means 'Nabu of Harû', Harû being one of the names for Nabu's main temple in Borsippa[292]. Both of these temples are also named *E-nig.gidru-kalam.ma-sum.ma* 'The house which bestows the sceptre of the land'[293]. This name, and Nabu's epithet 'The exalted one who hands out sceptre, throne and office'[294] has been taken to suggest that Nabu and his temple played some kind of role in the investiture of either the king or crown prince. This is supported by textual evidence that states that Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562BC) and

[291] Oates & Oates, 2001: 115
[292] Robson, 2008: 197
[293] Al-Mutawalli, 1999: 191
[294] Al-Mutawalli, 1999: 193

Nabonidus (555-539BC) received their sceptres in the *Nabu-ša-Hare* temple in Babylon, as well as the visit the crown prince Cambyses paid to the temple during the first New Year's festival celebrated by his father Cyrus, king of Persia (559-530BC) as recorded in the Nabonidus Chronicle[295]. This is significant as it occurs at the time Cambyses was named king of Babylonia by Cyrus[296], although the appointment seems to have been short lived.

Although Nisaba was active in many different areas, from administration to omens, her role always focused on simply recording information. Yet Nabu is also referred to as 'Lord of wisdom', and is given epithets such as 'Lord of broad intelligence[297]', suggesting that he is interpreting this information as well as recording it. This change reflects the changing role of the scribe in Mesopotamian society. Alongside the rise of Nabu we see that the focus of scribes moves far beyond the practical agricultural accounting that led Nisaba to be made patron of scribes, and becomes far more prominently concerned with wisdom, literature and the role of advisors working for the king and state[298]. This explains the prominence of Nabu, his roles as vizier and crown prince of Marduk could have been seen as reflecting the kind of relationship a bureaucrat with the scribal education customary for the urban elite at the time would wish to have with his king.

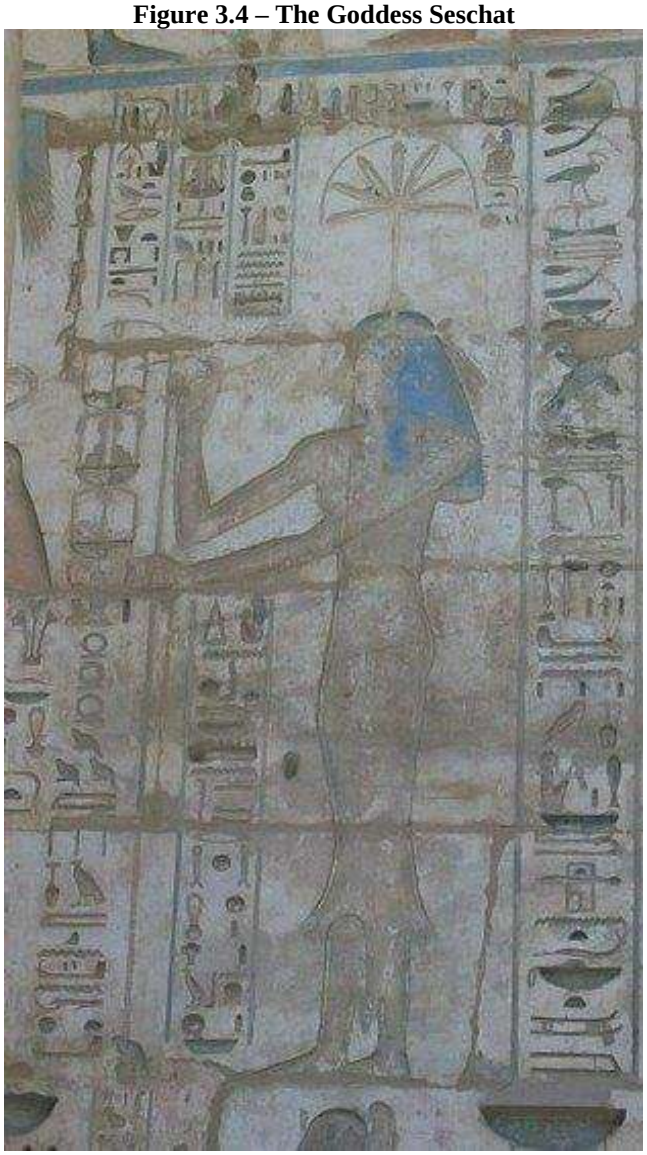
The Goddess Seschat

When writing first started to be used in Egypt (c.3100BC) it was Seschat who was given the role of patron goddess of scribes, as well as architects. In iconography she is depicted as a girl wearing a panther skin robe, and she wears a special headdress that is also the determinative used in her name (Fig. 3.4). Her name is written *sḫȝt*, literally meaning "scribe" or "recorder"[299], and may be linked to the ancient Egyptian verb *sḫȝ* "to remember". Though we assume from her name that her function would have involved recording, her exact role before the invention of writing is unknown. She is already attested in the Pre-Dynastic period

[295] George, 1996: 378
[296] Kuhrt, 2007: 51 (text 1, lines 24-28)
[297] Pomponio, 1998-2001: 18
[298] Wiggermann, 2011: 683
[299] Helck & Otto, 1972: 884

(late fourth, early third millennium) in the theophoric personal name of a person who also bears the title 'scribe of the divine books' (*sš mḏȝ- nṯr*)[300]. She remained a part of the Egyptian pantheon throughout the Pharaonic period, but her duties changed over time, moving away from the patronage of writing and instead towards the ritual life of the pharaoh. Much of the evidence for Seschat dates from the New Kingdom (1539-1077BC) onwards, but for the purpose of this study we will focus on what we know about the earlier attributes of Seschat (c.3000-2000BC).

Figure 3.4 – The Goddess Seschat



[300] Budde, 2000: 71

For most of Pharaonic history Seschat did not have a specific cult centre devoted to her, though there is evidence from the Old Kingdom of priests of Seschat in the Memphite region. Their existence is attested until the 6th Dynasty c.(2305-2118BC) but they then disappear. Priests of Seschat are not attested again before the 26th Dynasty (c.664-525BC), at Sais in the Nile Delta[301], but by this time her role had changed dramatically and she was no longer the patron deity of scribes. Despite the apparent lack of any information on an official cult centre of Seschat in the Early Dynastic period (c.2900-2545BC) she was worshipped by scribes and architects as their patron goddess because of her role as the scribe of the gods. We also have evidence for the importance of Seschat to the state in the Early Dynastic period, as an official seal found in grave 3060 at Saqqara[302] bears the title 'writer of Seschat' (*sš-Śš3t*)[303]. In Kaplony's original publication of the seal he does not translate or even transliterate this title. His brief comments address the fact that this is the first seal found at Sakkara to bear the name *smr-ht*, one of the pharaohs of the First Dynasty[304], which enables us to date the seal to c. 2763-2756BC. Unfortunately this is the only known example of the title being used.

Seschat was linked to the practical aspects of record keeping and accountancy, just as Nisaba was in Mesopotamia, while the more abstract wisdom and learning was Thoth's responsibility[305] (see below). In the Early Dynastic period her name and image are found on objects such as scribal palettes and ink cups[306], integral to the everyday activities of scribes. This practice is attested again in the New Kingdom, when dedicatory inscriptions are found on scribal palettes referring to both Thoth and Seschat[307], although in this period it was Thoth who was given prominence. Seschat also appears in the theophoric names of several high-ranking scribes and architects in the Early Dynastic period, mostly in the Memphite region[308] where her priests are also attested, as we have seen. Memphis was the administrative capital of Egypt in the Early Dynastic period and is where most administrative writing would have taken place, which may explain why this area would be the focal point of Seschat's worship.

[301] Budde, 2000: 56
[302] Kaplony, 1963: 144
[303] Budde, 2000: 71
[304] Kaplony, 1963: 144
[305] Wainwright, 1941: 32
[306] Budde, 2000: 71
[307] Glanville, 1932: 59f
[308] Budde, 2000: 84

However Seschat's status as patroness of the scribes does not seem to have outlasted the Old Kingdom period (c. 2543-2120BC); the evidence is abundant in the Early Dynastic period but then steadily declines. After the Old Kingdom evidence for Seschat acting as patron of scribes and architects is not found again until the Saite period, c.1500 years later. Does this mean that her popularity with the scribal class had waned in the intervening period? Although it is not impossible that she continued in her role as patron, the lack of evidence for this and the new roles she takes on for the pharaoh suggest otherwise to me. It is worthwhile to stress that when Nisaba (in Mesopotamia) loses her role as patron of writing, never again to be linked to it, her importance is drastically reduced. Seschat, however, maintained a link to writing and her prominence, albeit now firmly linked to the cultic duties she performed for the pharaoh.

Seschat's roles in the New Kingdom were still connected to her role as the goddess of writing and building, but they were all now in the sphere of the pharaoh rather than that of the scribes. She is depicted recording the booty and captured soldiers from military campaigns, reflecting the idea of Seschat representing the scribe and record keeper of the gods. She is also shown in scenes of temple foundation helping the pharaoh with the ritual of "stretching the cord", that is the measuring and laying out of new temples. This had been a prominent role of Seschat from the earliest times; a Second Dynasty (c.2730-2590BC) gate-jamb from Hierakonpolis which shows Seschat and the pharaoh Khasekhemwy hammering in boundary poles as part of a foundation ritual[309]. As a part of the foundation ceremony, Seschat was also considered to be an expert in sighting the stars, specifically Ursa Major, so that the temple could be aligned correctly to them[310].

Although it could be thought to reflect a disconnection from the world of the professional scribe, Seschat had always had this link to the royal sphere. Both Seschat and the original Mesopotamian god of writing, Nisaba, have strong links to the measuring and calculating of areas. But whereas Nisaba is linked to the measuring and laying out of fields, an area of vital importance to the lives of all people, Seschat was never seen as measuring fields, despite the fact that the Egyptians would almost certainly have carried this out for the same tax reasons that the Mesopotamians did. Instead Seschat is always involved in the measuring and

[309] Engelbach, 1934: 183f
[310] Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 124

laying out of temples, an area of activity that is closely connected to the pharaoh as the country's principal builder. This is shown by her role as patron of architects as these jobs imply the building of monumental architecture, one of the roles of the pharaoh. Ordinary houses in Egypt were made of mud brick and were almost certainly built and repaired by the inhabitants themselves rather than by these professionals.

The change of focus in Seschat's role may be linked to the changing political fortunes of Egypt. At the end of the 6th Dynasty (c.2118BC), during the First Intermediate Period (c.2118-1980BC), Egypt lost its political unity and its centre at Memphis, and was instead ruled by two competing dynasties at Herakleopolis in the north and Thebes in the south. This would have disrupted and changed the bureaucracy of Egypt to a great extent, possibly explaining Seschat's loss of prominence in this sphere. When the country was reunified the pharaohs would have been seeking ways of proving their legitimacy. Even as the patron goddess of scribes Seschat had always been a part of the ritual life cycle of the pharaoh and so this role was emphasised to legitimise rule and political unity. By stressing this royal side of Seschat so prominently it may well have become impossible for the scribal class to continue claiming her as their patron.

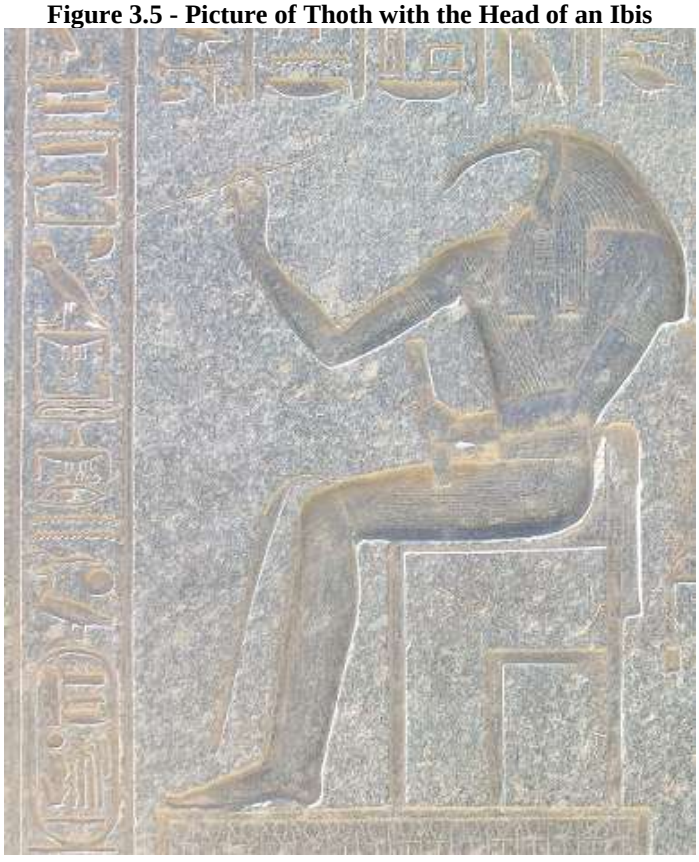
However, Seschat's loss of the role of patron of the scribes may simply have been because her role as goddess of writing was not as broad as it first seems. The epithet that most clearly links her to writing is 'Lady of Writing' (*nbt sš*), but at least in the Graeco-Roman period this certainly refers to monumental inscriptions rather than cursive writing, as other epithets such as "the primeval one, who initiated incising (i.e. monumental writing)"[311] show. This could be another reason why she fell out of favour as patron of scribes as the majority of scribes in the Graeco-Roman period would have been working with the demotic or cursive hieroglyphic scripts, monumental inscriptions being a very small and specialised area linked to the pharaoh. It is of course also possible that it was the other way round and that she lost her connection to cursive writing because she lost her connection to the scribes. Unfortunately, because of the scant evidence available it is difficult to say which change occurred first.

[311] Budde, 2000: 201

The God Thoth

When Seschat lost her role as patron of scribes it is Thoth who seems to have taken it over. Thoth held the very important role of the moon god in Egypt. In his most common form Thoth was depicted as a man with the head of an ibis (Fig. 3.5). This link to the ibis may originate in the fact that this animal fought against malevolent forces, such as poisonous snakes[312]. The earliest evidence of an ibis deity in Egypt comes from the First Dynasty (c. 2900-2730BC). Several Early Dynastic items, including the Palermo Stone, mention an ibis deity[313] but there is no evidence to prove that this is specifically Thoth as we know him from later periods. Thoth was also represented as a baboon or a man with the head of a baboon, an animal that is later associated with scribes. The baboon was probably identified with Thoth because at sunrise wild baboons make lots of noise and jump around[314]. This was seen by the ancient Egyptians as the baboons hailing the return of the sun from the netherworld, and as we shall see this links to one of the roles of Thoth.

Figure 3.5 - Picture of Thoth with the Head of an Ibis



[312] Bleeker, 1973: 110
[313] Wilkinson, 1999: 297
[314] Quirke, 1992: 32

Theologically Thoth was one of the pre-eminent gods in the Egyptian pantheon as he was one of the ten gods who were said to have made up the ruling dynasty on earth before humans began to rule[315]. The Royal Canon of Turin tells us that Thoth ruled for 7,726 years compared to just 300 years of rule for Horus[316], the god more usually related to kingship in Egypt. This shows not only that he was considered to be one of the oldest gods, but that he was highly regarded and seen as one of the more powerful gods. He was also given a key role in the creation myth. Thoth is called the heart and tongue of the Creator God[317], a position often filled by Re but also by different gods at different times and in different parts of Egypt. The universe began when the Creator God spoke; words created the world and therefore Thoth, as the Creator God's tongue, had a key role in the creation[318]. This highlights how important the ancient Egyptians believed Thoth to be, without his tongue the Creator God would not have been able to speak and therefore create.

Thoth was credited by the Egyptians with having invented writing and passing it on to man, an idea that is appropriate given the other qualities that were attributed to him. As the moon god he was also the god of wisdom and knowledge and was credited with knowing things that even the other gods did not know, though because of this he is often depicted in literature as "pretentious and pedantic"[319]. He was said to have written the 'Divine Books', a set of 42 books that supposedly contained all the wisdom in the world, including annals, laws and magical texts[320]. In fact the Greeks later attributed to Thoth (as an aspect or version of their own god Hermes Trismegistos) the invention of astronomy, astrology, mathematics, geometry and medicine[321], as well speech, the different languages[322] and the letters of the alphabet[323]. In the Egyptian tradition, man had invented nothing on his own, merely discovering what the gods already knew, with their consent[324].

315 Bleeker, 1973: 113
316 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 29
317 Budge, 1904: 407
318 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 100
319 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 101
320 Bleeker, 1973: 141
321 Spence, 1990: 108
322 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 103
323 Spence, 1990: 108
324 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 95

One of Thoth's main responsibilities concerned the journey of the dead to reach the netherworld. As part of this journey their heart was weighed to see if they were worthy of entering the netherworld. If they were not then their heart would be eaten by a fearsome beast instead. This was a popular scene in royal tomb paintings, and Thoth was always present in these scenes as it was his role to record the weight of the heart so that the judgement could not be questioned[325]. As well as this he had the position of 'secretary of Re'[326], a position of fundamental importance and comparable to Nabu's role as scribe of Marduk. According to Egyptian belief, every day the sun-god Re would sail his boat across the sky and at night he would sail it through the netherworld. Thoth's role in this was first to plot the course that the boat would take through the sky, and then to protect Re whilst he was in the netherworld[327]. In other words, without Thoth Re's journey could not have been accomplished and the sun, literally, would not have risen. As with the different roles of Seschat, it is impossible to know if Thoth had these responsibilities because of his association with writing, or if he was linked to writing because of these responsibilities.

It was Re, as the Creator God, who was said to have created Thoth, the moon god, so that man would have light to see at night. Because of this he was known as "Thoth, Re's substitute[328]". The waxing and waning of the moon is one of the simplest ways to measure the passing of time, so it is not surprising that Thoth also became the god of time[329]. Because of this Thoth was also in control of the cultic calendar and the correct observance of rituals, as it was the lunar calendar that determined when religious rituals took place[330]. As discussed earlier, ancient peoples had few external references with which to measure the passing of time, although the menstrual cycle was one way of doing this it would only have been effective within a family, not on a national level, as women have different cycles. The moon, however, has a regular cycle and is visible to all so was often used by early societies to regulate their calendars, both religious and official.

[325] Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 146
[326] Bleeker, 1973: 107
[327] Bleeker, 1973: 119f
[328] Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 118
[329] Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 118
[330] Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 119

Thoth was also known as the "right arm" of the Supreme Deity[331], though the exact god who held this pre-eminent position changed over time. The Supreme Deity was usually identified in Egyptian religion with the Creator God. As the "right arm" Thoth was integral to the interaction between the gods. Whenever the Supreme Deity made a decision he would recite it to Thoth, who would then write it down and make the news public by visiting and telling all of the relevant gods[332]. It is interesting to note that whilst he recorded these decisions with writing, it was via oral communication that he spread the message, as we shall see in Chapter Six this difference in the function and use of writing and orality in Egypt was quite common. But this was not the only part that Thoth played in the Supreme Deity's decision making. In literature, the Supreme Deity was seen as habitually inactive and Thoth would often have to rouse him into activity, as well as giving him advice on the best course of action[333] or calling together the other gods for a council if a wider consensus was being sought[334].

Thoth's cult centre was at Hermopolis Magna in Upper Egypt. Now known after the name of the local village el-Ashmunein, the site has been excavated several times. Unfortunately due to the high water table in the area very little survives from before the New Kingdom, apart from the Middle Kingdom gate of Amenemhat II (c.1878-1843BC)[335]. The German Hildesheim expedition (1929-1939[336]) discovered the remains of mud brick walls that may have dated to the Old Kingdom. However little is known about these with certainty, and more recent expeditions by the British Museum were unable to excavate these remains as they now lay at least 1m below the level of the water table[337].

At Hermopolis Magna, at least in the New Kingdom, Thoth's consort was Nehmetaway[338], a goddess of justice. Elsewhere however, he was associated with two other goddesses. One was Ma'at[339], the embodiment of the concept of cosmic order and balance, and it was her symbol, the feather, that the hearts

331 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 35
332 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 39
333 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 39
334 Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 40
335 Spencer, 1989: 13
336 Roeder, 1951
337 Spencer, 1989: 63
338 Shaw & Nicholson, 1995: 288
339 Bleeker, 1973: 122

of the dead were weighed against, providing a neat link between the two deities. The other goddess was the already familiar Seschat, who could be seen as Thoth's consort, his daughter or his sister[340], roles that were almost interchangeable for the gods of Egypt and simply show how strongly Seschat was connected to and associated with Thoth.

Each of these consorts directly relates to an aspect of Thoth. Like Nehmetaway he was a god of justice, recording the weight of the hearts of the dead which had been weighed against his consort Ma'at. He was the inventor of writing of which his consort Seschat was patron. However these goddesses also all relate to the pharaoh. One of the pharaoh's main roles was to keep cosmic order (*ma'at*) through his devotions to the gods and his rule, and he was the ultimate justice in the country. We have already discussed some of his connections to Seschat but, as well as these, she was also involved in the decreeing of his fate, as by inscribing the names of the pharaoh on the leaves of the sacred tree she made him immortal[341]. Thoth was also linked to the sacred tree as it was believed he composed the annals that recorded the life of the pharaoh and this too was inscribed on the leaves of the sacred tree. The figure of Thoth, therefore, is at the centre of a web of connections made between the exercise of justice, the cosmic order, royal rule and decision making, as well as writing.

The God Enki

Finally we will briefly look at the role and functions of Enki, as he plays a prominent role in several of the Mesopotamian stories about the origins of writing which we will discuss in Chapter Four. Enki, also known by his Akkadian name Ea, was a member of the Mesopotamian triad alongside Enlil, the king of the gods, and Anu, the god of the sky and probably the father of Enki and Enlil[342]. These were the gods with the power of creation and his association with them shows the high esteem in which Enki was held. His cult centre was the city of Eridu, a city in the far south of Mesopotamia on the coast where the Euphrates

[340] Wilkinson, 2003: 217
[341] Shaw & Nicholson, 1995: 264
[342] Black & Green, 1992: 75

reaches the Persian Gulf. His main temple there was called the *É-en-gur-a*[343] 'The house of sweet waters' and he lived there with his wife, Damkina. He was said to be the father of several gods, but most importantly his eldest son was Marduk, often identified with the earlier god Asarluḫi[344]. As we have already discussed, with the rise of the dynasty of Hammurabi of Babylon, Marduk became the head of the Babylonian pantheon, and was eventually regarded as the most powerful and supreme ruler of all the Mesopotamian gods. Thus Enki's identification as Marduk's father reinforces the respect with which he was accorded.

Enki was depicted, like Nabu, as a man with the typical Mesopotamian divine attributes: long hair and beard, a horned crown, and a long elaborate robe. He is distinguished from all other Mesopotamian gods by the two streams of water, often containing swimming fish, that flow to or from his shoulders (Fig. 3.6). This water represents the abyss (*apsu*) of which he was the master[345]. According to *Enuma Eliš,* the Babylonian creation myth, Apsu was the being that created the gods along with Tiamat, the ocean. However, soon after doing so he became upset by their raucous behaviour and so decided to destroy them. Enki foiled Apsu's plan by killing him and his advisor Mummu, then building his home on the *apsu*:

> "He made Apsu sleep, he was drenched with slumber….
>
> He tied up Apsu, he killed him,
>
> Mummu he bound, he locked him securely.
>
> He founded his dwelling upon Apsu[346]"

The *apsu,* literally 'the sweet waters', was imagined as an underground ocean that contained sweet, rather than salt, water. It was thought to reach the surface of the world in certain places; wells and pools within temples were particularly believed to contain this 'sweet water'. Among other things, this water was supposed to have special healing qualities and so was a part of many incantation rituals for healing. Thus, as well as being master of the *apsu,* Enki was the Mesopotamian god of wisdom, knowledge and the arts. Because of the connection between knowledge and the *apsu,* his epithets show Enki was also the god of

[343] George, 1993: 82, no. 248
[344] Kramer & Maier, 1989: 142
[345] Black et al, 2004: 331, l.1-8
[346] Foster, 1995: 13, lines 64, 69-71

incantations[347] and purification rituals[348].

Figure 3.6 – The God Enki

Unlike many of the other Mesopotamian gods, Enki was imagined as being particularly well-disposed towards mankind[349]. When the rest of the gods decided to flood the world in order to kill all humans, it was Enki who disagreed and warned Ziusudra that the flood was coming, telling him to build a boat[350]. By doing this he saved mankind from total annihilation as he had saved the gods from the same fate in *Enuma Eliš*. This image of Enki as a god who cared about humanity may be why one of his main roles was as god of crafts. This was not just generalised worship, 'one god fits all', Enki had different names as the god of different crafts; according to the god lists found on CT24 42 and CT25 48 he had names for the crafts of: potters, smiths, masons, singers, *kalu*-priests, mariners, cobblers, precious metal workers, gardeners, ore workers, stone cutters, goat herds, tillers, clerks/officials, and possibly carpenters. The tablets CT24 43 and CT24 47 also state that he was guardian of other professions but do not assign him specific names for these crafts: *baru*-priests, doctors, launderers, weavers (male and female), barbers, messengers (runners), sculptors and scribes[351].

[347] Galter, 1981: 37
[348] Galter, 1981: 36
[349] Kramer & Maier, 1989: 1
[350] van Koppen, 2011: 142
[351] Ebeling, 1938a: 377

Conclusions

In ancient religions the perceptions of what the gods were like was based on what humans are like, as of course humans were the only point of reference. The gods were supposed to represent what was perfect, and so they embodied the absolute ideals of human behaviour. As scribe of the gods, Seschat and Thoth can therefore be seen as the Egyptian idea of the perfect scribe, as Nisaba and Nabu represent the Mesopotamian ideal. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia the original patron goddesses of writing enjoyed prominence for the first millennium or so in which writing was used, and then lost this role in favour of male gods of wisdom and bureaucracy. This would seem to signal a change in the way the ancient societies saw writing. By the time this change occurs writing was of course no longer a novelty, despite the low literacy levels. It may be that the professional writer no longer felt it necessary to have a god specifically for their craft, but instead began favouring gods of wisdom and bureaucracy with reference to their career and position. This is connected to the expanding use of writing into fields other than administration; over the course of the third millennium BC writing was employed for long distance communication, legal transactions, official inscriptions, and literature.

We also see that whilst in Egypt Seschat's name and image were placed on scribal tools, this is not the case in Mesopotamia with Nisaba. This is because of the differences in the writing technology of the two regions. In Egypt writing was carried out on papyrus using ink, whilst in Mesopotamia cuneiform was impressed onto clay tablets using a stylus. Thus there would have been no writing tools, such as palettes or ink cups, on which the Mesopotamian scribes could have placed the name or image of Nisaba. The production of papyrus and ink was much more elaborate than making clay tablets, we still do not know the exact methods used by the ancient Egyptians to make their papyrus. This may provide the link between these technologies and the realm of Thoth as the chemical processes necessary to produce these writing materials were quite possibly considered secret knowledge.

As well as the pattern of change from the second millennium goddess to the first millennium god there are several interesting links between the gods from the different regions. Both Nabu and Thoth who take over the role of god of writing from the earlier female deities are also closely associated to the supreme gods of

their respective states and ascribed a role that often seems to mirror the human roles the king's chief advisor. Seschat and Nisaba are both linked to the stars by their roles. Nisaba is said to be in charge of the heavenly writings, the omens that the gods write in the stars, whereas Seschat is said to be expert in sighting the stars as part of the foundation ceremony. As well as being linked to the stars, both of these roles imply a secret, contained knowledge, as only the highly specialised scholars, usually with cultic connections, would track the movements of the stars and understand the implications, or know which ones were needed to correctly align a temple. There is also an element of fate or destiny implied in their roles, as Seschat decrees the fate of the pharaoh by writing his names on the sacred tree, and Nisaba decrees the fate of man with the omens she places in the sky.

Despite these similarities there is still a fundamental difference between Seschat and Nisaba as patrons of writing. Seschat's responsibilities are always closely tied to the pharaoh and royal ideology: she uses the stars to found temples, she decrees the pharaoh's fate, and is probably linked more closely with monumental than cursive writing. This reflects the early uses to which writing was put in Egypt. As we saw in Chapter Two, the earliest evidence of writing in Egypt comes from an elite, possibly royal, tomb, and seems to have some kind of ritual or ideological context rather than a purely functional use. Nisaba, on the other hand, is never linked to the king or royal ideology in this way. She measures fields, she gives mankind the omens, and is praised as the person who will help all scribes in their day to day work. Again, as we saw in Chapter Two this relates to the earliest evidence of writing we have in Mesopotamia, which was essentially for accounting. This was designed to help the temple worker carry out their daily duties and to ensure the correct people were supplying the correct goods, it has little or nothing to do with the king.

It is in the second millennium when the use of writing had expanded in both regions that we find the gods most associated with writing hold much more similar positions in the pantheon. Both Thoth and Nabu are seen in the context of vizier to the head of the pantheon, their links to writing much more closely tied to the idea of a professional bureaucracy. Although writing had started with different functions and in different areas in Egypt and Mesopotamia, its expansion into other roles had slowly led to a situation where both regions were employing writing for similar functions and this is reflected in their beliefs about the gods of

writing.

As the history and culture of Egypt and Mesopotamia is much better understood in the second millennium rather than the third, it could be argued that many of the views espoused by modern scholars on the origins and impact of writing on non-literate ancient societies is actually based on this later second millennium evidence, rather than the crucial third millennium evidence. This may explain why there is often an assumption that writing played a similar role in both regions, and even that one society took at least the idea of writing from the other. In Chapter Four we will look at the literature from both regions that discusses writing and scribes to further investigate the different thoughts on writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Chapter 4 – Literary Compositions as Sources for Ancient Views on Writing

We will now turn our focus to the literary compositions that I have identified as engaging with ideas about writing and scribes. To the historian the use of literature presents methodological challenges as it can be almost impossible to tell the historical fact from fiction. However, in this study I am not trying to use the literary compositions to reconstruct historical fact, but to look at the attitudes of the societies that created them. With this aim the use of literature is very fitting, as "myth naturally contemplates and describes the idealised perception and understanding that the writer has of her or his world[352]". Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature is therefore analysed in the following for its potential to illuminate the attitudes of ancient societies.

Both Egypt and Mesopotamia have very different cultural and literary traditions, and engage with the themes of writing and scribal life in different ways. We will first look at the ancient ideas on the origins of writing before looking at the idea of the power of writing and finally how scribes were represented, or rather represented themselves, in the literature.

Views on the origins of writing

Some stories tell us how or why writing came to exist. This theme is prominent in the Mesopotamian literature but not discussed in the Egyptian compositions, as it seems to have been the general Egyptian view that writing was invented by Thoth and given by him to humanity. In Mesopotamia there is more than one version of the story and the invention of writing is ascribed both to various gods and even a human, albeit a king. Thus the works that we will be looking at in this section are all from Mesopotamia: *Enki and Inanna*, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, and *The Babyloniaca* of Berossos. It should be recognised that there are no stories from either region that are solely concerned with explaining the existence of writing, it

[352] Averbeck, 2003: 25

is only ever a small part of the narrative plot. This contrasts with the prominence assigned to the topic in modern scholarship that we saw in Chapters One and Two.

Enki and Inanna (Mesopotamia)

There are two main manuscripts for *Enki and Inanna*, as well as a few small fragments. Both tablets are from Nippur, and date to the late 18th century BC[353]. The story of *Enki and Inanna* is quite simple. The goddess Inanna wants to make Uruk, her city, more prosperous and well regarded so that she will receive more glory for herself. To do this she visits Enki, the god of wisdom, and gets him drunk. In his drunken state he begins giving her the "me's"; these are the essence of objects, abilities and concepts. They are what the Sumerian scribes thought of as the basis of their society[354] and the only way in which Enki's knowledge can be passed on to mankind. The main part of the story is a list of over 100 me's split into smaller groups explaining precisely what Inanna took when she removed the me's back to her temple, the Eanna in Uruk.

It is not made clear in this story why Enki has possession of the me's. We know from other stories, such as *Enki and the World Order* (see below), that the me's were always seen as being under his control, and that it was his right to distribute them. It may be that it was his role as the god of wisdom that gave him the right to pass this knowledge onto others, including humans. However, although in *Enki and the World Order* it is his responsibility to assign this knowledge and power to people and gods, in the story of *Enki and Inanna* it is made very clear that Enki was not supposed to give Inanna these powers, and passed them on only as a result of her trickery. This tells us that they were supposed to be under the control of Enki, and no other god.

The list of me's includes everything from sex and prostitution to straightforwardness and rebellion[355], but it is the section that includes writing that interests us:

> "the craft of the carpenter, the craft of the coppersmith, the craft of the scribe, the craft of the smith, the craft of the leather-worker, the craft of the fuller, the craft of the builder, the

[353] Farber, 1995: 287
[354] Kramer, 1944a: 64
[355] ETCSL: 1.3.1

craft of the reed-worker[356]"

These were some of the key technologies of the time as they all required specialist skills and knowledge. Because of this the people who mastered them were important and respected members of society. Writing, the craft of the scribe, is included alongside them, and this makes it clear that it was seen as involving the same level of expertise. It also shows that writing was thought by the Mesopotamians to belong to the highly specialised craft skills.

Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta (Mesopotamia)

Another Mesopotamian story that deals with the origins of writing has a very different explanation than that given in *Enki and Inanna,* where it is clearly seen as a gift that came from the gods. *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* is one of several stories about the legendary king Enmerkar of Uruk. These stories were probably originally composed in the Ur III period (2112-2004BC), but the majority of the extant tablets date to the Old Babylonian period, specifically the late 18th century BC, and were written in the scribal schools of Nippur and Ur[357]. According to the Sumerian King List Enmerkar was one of the early kings of Uruk (also referred to as Kulab). In most of the stories concerning Enmerkar he is battling the lord of Aratta, a region whose geographical location or actual existence is debated. It has recently been suggested Aratta can be identified with the Iranian site of Jiroft, though this has still not been proven[358]. What we learn about the location of Aratta in the stories is that one must cross the mountains to the east of Uruk to reach it, so it was imagined in or beyond the Zagros mountain range. In Mesopotamia the mountains are often used as a literary device to suggest otherness and the supernatural so it is possible, though not certain, that Aratta is a fictional place.

The story of *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* is based around the idea that Enmerkar is told by Inanna, his city's patron goddess, to build her a new temple, the Eanna. In order to do this he needs to acquire precious metals and stones which are only found in Aratta, but there is no trade between Uruk and Aratta. To make things more difficult the lord of Aratta is jealous of the favour shown to Uruk by Inanna as she is the patron

[356] ETCSL: 1.3.1, (Segment D, lines 10-13)
[357] Vanstiphout, 2003: 1
[358] See: Covington, 2004

goddess of Aratta as well, and so he resists Enmerkar's pleas to supply the goods needed and instead suggests a contest to see who Inanna really favours.

The contest takes the form of riddles sent back and forth across the mountains, carried orally by messengers who have to repeat the challenges and carry the responses back. These riddles get longer and more complicated as the story continues, until eventually Enmerkar's riddle is too long and complicated for the messenger to be able to remember.

> "his speech was very grand, its meaning very deep. The messenger's mouth was too *heavy*;
> he could not repeat it[359]"

In response to this problem Enmerkar invents writing so that the messenger no longer needs to memorise the riddle:

> "Before that day, there had been no putting words on clay. But now, when the sun rose on that day - so it was: The lord of Kulab [Enmerkar] had put words as on a tablet - so it was![360]".

By inventing writing Enmerkar wins the contest, and as a consequence the people of Aratta have to accept Uruk's supremacy and provide Uruk with the precious stones and metals needed for Inanna's temple. This shows how much power the Mesopotamians attributed to writing, culturally and politically. The riddles and contests between Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta become increasingly more difficult and Enmerkar wins all of them, but nevertheless the lord of Aratta shows no sign of capitulating. Yet as soon as he is confronted with the writing, he understands its importance and he accepts that he has been beaten.

We should note the link that is made here between the origins of writing, the city of Uruk and Inanna's temple, the Eanna. This link is also made in *Enki and Inanna*, in which Inanna takes the me's back to the Eanna. To modern interpreters, this connection is striking because, as we saw in Chapter Two, the Eanna precinct is indeed where the earliest evidence of writing in Mesopotamia, dating to the late fourth millennium BC, has been found. Inanna herself is not linked by the Mesopotamians to writing in any other contexts, suggesting the link is being made here not because of the goddess, whose role is of mistress of sex

[359] Vanstiphout, 2003: 85 (II: Q, lines501 - 502)
[360] Vanstiphout, 2003: 85 (II: Q, lines 504 - 506)

and battle, but because of Uruk and the Eanna. Does this indicate that the local traditions had preserved a knowledge of the birthplace of writing? I tend to assume so.

The Babyloniaca of Berossos (Mesopotamia)

The stories of *Enki and Innana* and *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* both contain early Mesopotamian traditions of the origins of writing. However, we also have a much later tradition in *The Babyloniaca* written by the Babylonian priest and scholar Berossos. Although *The Babyloniaca* were composed only around 280BC, Berossos based his work on ancient Mesopotamian traditions, written and oral, and his account does indeed fit with other earlier evidence. He had access to this knowledge as he was a priest of Marduk at his temple the Esagila in Babylon[361], so not only had access to the temple libraries but was also capable of reading the cuneiform records, which by the Hellenistic period was increasingly rare.

The Babyloniaca were written in Greek and in a Greek rather than a Mesopotamian style; as well as using a narrative form that is otherwise unknown in Mesopotamia, Berossos also included a geographical description of Babylon which is a characteristic of Greek historiography but not part of the Mesopotamian tradition[362]. Unfortunately *The Babyloniaca* do not survive to us intact and are known only through fragments quoted in other ancient works, whose authors often had not seen the original but copied extracts from even earlier writers who are now lost to us as well[363]. This causes difficulties as without knowledge of the entire book we do not know what else Berossos may have written or what emphasis he placed on the surviving episodes. We also do not know how the surviving fragments would have originally fitted together, and have no way of knowing if the extracts were quoted accurately. Despite these problems it is still worth studying as it is still likely to contain some elements of the Mesopotamian perspective.

The Babyloniaca were written in one sense as an attempt to explain Mesopotamian history and culture to a Greek audience, as the Seleucid empire controlled Mesopotamia at the time. However Berossos's work also seems to have been an attempt to showcase Mesopotamia as the oldest of all civilisations, a title also

[361] Kuhrt, 1987: 33
[362] Kuhrt, 1987: 47
[363] de Breucker, 2011: 642

claimed by Egypt. Manetho, an Egyptian priest, historian, and contemporary of Berossos, estimated Egyptian civilisation as being 24,900 years old, but Berossos claimed Mesopotamian history was much older than that, saying the period before the flood had lasted 432,000 years[364]. The fragment which interests us in the present context could also be seen in this light, as it claims that before they were taught to the Mesopotamians, various aspects of civilisation had not been known to man. The fragment also stresses that since that time no new aspects had been added, according to this view Mesopotamian civilisation had emerged fully-formed and never been bettered, something that the Egyptians also believed about their own society.

We are interested in that part of Berossos's work that concerns the very early history of the world, the first year after Bel (=Marduk) had created it. Bel is said to have sent his servants to teach man the skills needed to bring order into the world, that is, to create the civilised world. These servants are fish-creatures;

> "its entire body was that of a fish, and under the head of the fish another head was fitted to it; and at the tail there were feet like a man; and its speech was like human speech" (From Eusebius, *Chronographia*, FGrH 680 F1a)[365]

Some representations of these creatures did survive in the archaeological record, such as at Kalhu, (modern Nimrud) where excavations of the 9th century temple of Nabu, whose close links with writing we discussed in the previous chapter, revealed the so-called Fish-Gate. This entrance to the temple is flanked by two large reliefs of fish-creatures[366], indicating that already in the Neo-Assyrian period the link between the fish-creatures and writing was made.

The first of the fish-creatures to be sent to mankind was Oannes. He would spend his days with the humans and return to the sea at night. Oannes was given the task of civilising mankind and so:

> "it taught letters to men, and diverse sorts of skills; the forming of cities, and construction of temples, and understanding of laws; and that it taught the delimitation of territory and portions; and that it demonstrated the collection of grains and fruits; and that indeed it

[364] de Breucker, 2011: 649f
[365] Brill's New Jacoby, Online Edition
[366] Oates & Oates, 2001: 111

> consigned to men everything that might be fit for familiarity of life on the land; and [he says] that from that time forth nothing else about these things has been discovered." (From Eusebius, *Chronographia*, FGrH 680 F1a) [367]

Thus, some three millennia after writing began, Berossos described it as one of the key aspects of civilisation, building on an idea already encountered in much older Mesopotamian stories, such as *Enki and Inanna*, and *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta.* This list is also very close to the things that contemporary Greeks had attributed to Thoth as Hermes Trismegistos, as we saw in the previous chapter, and so here Berossos may be following a Greek tradition. It is also strikingly similar to the attributes that modern scholars assign to the idea of 'civilisation', as discussed in Chapter One.

Many of the things that Oannes is said to have taught mankind had also been thought to be under the care of the goddess Nisaba in the tradition of the late third millennium. As well as her link to agriculture through her role as a grain goddess, writing, mathematics, measuring fields and marking borders are all areas assigned to Nisaba in the story of *Enki and the World Order* (see below). Many of these concepts, writing, mathematics and surveying, were also attributed to the goddess Seschat in Egypt, showing a clear link between all these areas in the minds of both Mesopotamia and Egypt. This is further strengthened by the fact that these were skills that we know from school tablets were taught to scribal students in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian term for scribe is *dubsar*, from *dub* - "clay tablet", *sar*- "to go fast and straight", so literally to go fast and straight on a clay tablet. This reinforces the idea that a scribe was not just concerned with writing, but with a variety of skills that involved making impressions on clay tablets, including numeracy and geometry.

Views on the power of the written word

Stories from Mesopotamia and Egypt do not just look at how writing came to exist, but discuss its functions as well. It seems clear from the literature from both regions that writing was considered to have power embedded within it; the very act of writing was a magical act. This belief was manifested in different ways in the two cultures. The following stories highlight this powerful aspect of writing within both regions.

[367] Brill's New Jacoby, Online Edition

From Egypt we have the story of *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah,* whilst from Mesopotamia we will revisit *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta* and look at *The Sumerian Sargon Legend.*

Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah (Egypt)

Writing was considered by the ancient Egyptians to have magical powers, and this is a theme that is explored in the story of *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah.* This story is quite late, the most complete copy is a demotic papyrus from the Ptolemaic period (c.305-30BC) in the Cairo Museum, though some other fragments, also dating to the Ptolemaic period, are attested[368]. The narrative centres around the Book of Thoth, a divine book of magic spells that the god Thoth was thought to have written;

> "When you [recite the first spell you will] charm the sky, the earth, the netherworld, the mountains and the waters. You will discover what all the birds of the sky and all the reptiles are saying. You will see the fish of the deep [though there are twenty-one divine cubits of water] over [them]. When you recite the second spell, it will happen that, whether you are in the netherworld or in your form on earth, you will see Pre appearing in the sky with his Ennead, and the Moon in its form rising.[369],,

This is too much of a temptation for Setne, he is the hero of the story and is thought to be based on the historical prince Khamwas, a son of Ramses II (1279-1213BC) and the high priest of Ptah in Memphis[370]. Setne goes to search for the book which had been hidden in the tomb of Naneferkaptah, the son of the pharaoh Mernebptah[371] (1213-1203BC). Despite the tale of woe told by the mummy of Naneferkaptah's wife, Ahwere, about the problems the book caused their family, including their deaths, Setne still decides to take it. Inevitably disaster follows, leading him to repent and seek forgiveness.

The story contains one particularly interesting passage regarding attitudes towards writing, namely the way in which Naneferkaptah memorises the words in the book:

> "he had a sheet of new papyrus brought to him. He wrote on it every word that was in the

[368] Lichtheim, 1980: 125
[369] Lichtheim, 1980: 128f (p3, col. 10-15)
[370] Lichtheim, 1980: 8
[371] Lichtheim, 1980: 127

> book before him. He soaked it in beer, he dissolved it in water. When he knew it had dissolved, he drank it and knew what had been in it.[372]"

This demonstrates the idea that writing down words gave them a physical power, as it is by consuming the written word that Naneferkaptah truly gains the power of the book. Simply reading or hearing the words of the book was not considered powerful enough to lodge the spells in Setne's mind. This is not the only time we encounter this idea in Egypt, some inscriptions on statues had libations poured over them in order to make magical remedies[373].

The idea of the power of the written word is not confined to Egypt, but appears in other ancient societies, albeit in different ways. In Mesopotamia the written name of an object was literally considered to be the object itself, and the act of writing was seen as an act of creation[374]. The Mesopotamians also believed that if a person's name was forgotten they would be condemned to wander the earth forever as ghosts, thus the worst thing that could happen to a person was the removal of their name from the Tablet of Destiny[375]. However, it was not just the written word that had power for the Egyptians, the spoken word was also just as powerful in its own way. As already discussed in Chapter Three, one version of the Egyptian creation myth incorporates the spoken word in a highly significant way. The universe begins with the god Shu (life/air) suddenly coming into existence and talking to the primordial ocean from which the Creator God emerges. It is by talking to Shu that the Creator God creates himself and the snakes who aid him in the creation of the world[376]. So in that story it is the spoken word that is believed to contain the power.

The other interesting point in terms of writing in this story is that a difference between the ability to write and the ability to read is made. Active and passive literacy are distinguished, for Ahwere, the wife of Naneferkaptah, can read but is not able to write:

> "As I could not write - I mean, compared with Naneferkaptah, my brother, who was a good

[372] Lichtheim, 1980: 131 (p4, col. 1-5)
[373] Baines, 1983: 589
[374] Bottéro, 2000: 44
[375] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 64
[376] Meeks & Meeks: 1993: 14

> scribe and very wise man[377]"

Ahwere and Naneferkaptah are the only children of the pharaoh, and the story implies that they have been given the best of everything which is also why they married each other. We are told earlier in the story that Naneferkaptah is very well educated, as we would expect a prince to be, and whilst princess Ahwere has also received a scribal education she has clearly been taught only the simpler task of reading and little of the more complicated task of writing. This could again be associated with the idea of the power of the written word: Ahwere is highly educated for a woman and yet she has still been denied the power of writing. This story certainly shows a distinct separation of these two skills in the Egyptian mind, and suggests that writing was thought more powerful than reading.

Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta (Mesopotamia)

Like the Egyptians the Mesopotamians also saw writing as a powerful tool, but in a different way. This is made clear in the story of *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta*. The power of writing is highlighted in the response of the lord of Aratta when he receives Enmerkar's letter, the first ever written document:

> "The lord of Aratta took from the messenger the tablet (and held it) next to a brazier. The lord of Aratta inspected the tablet. The spoken words were mere wedges - his brow darkened; The lord of Aratta kept looking at the tablet (in the light of) the brazier[378]"

The physical act of holding the tablet and looking at it forces the lord of Aratta to submit to Enmerkar. He acknowledges the power of writing as he realises it is a technology that is so incredible he can never better it, and thus he must accept the superiority of the man who invented it. From that time on trade is established between Uruk and Aratta, with Uruk assuming the dominant role.

As with all stories about Enmerkar the aim is to glorify Uruk, and therefore Sumer. This story particularly focuses on the technologies of the region, with the three challenges involving the three main exports: grain, textiles and finished goods[379]. On top of these Enmerkar then introduces writing, which is so powerful that

[377] Lichtheim, 1980: 131 (p4, col. 1-5)
[378] Vanstiphout, 2003: 87 (II: S, lines 537-541)
[379] Vanstiphout, 2003: 54

it establishes Sumer's superiority over its neighbours once and for all[380]. However, this also showcases the importance which the Mesopotamians put on writing. Despite Enmerkar proving his supremacy through solving three riddles, it is only his invention of writing that is able to force the lord of Aratta to submit to him.

This gives us an insight into the Mesopotamian feelings about writing. The way writing succeeds in subduing the lord of Aratta when other technologies had failed suggests the Mesopotamians saw writing as uniquely powerful. The fact that the result is the establishment of trade between the two regions may also suggest an awareness of the original use of early writing, with its application to controlling the exchange of goods. It seems it was the need for accounting and keeping track of goods coming in and out of the Eanna temple at Uruk that led to writing, and for several centuries this was all that it was used for. Furthermore, our story may suggest an awareness of and pride in having invented writing, as all of the technologies mentioned are particularly linked to Sumer. The story also shows an awareness that not all societies are literate, an observation that reflects the cultural realities of the third millennium BC. This is connected with the explicit view that the literate society is superior to the non-literate, an idea that is, consciously or not, shared by many modern commentators.

The Sumerian Sargon Legend (Mesopotamia)

The power of writing is shown in *The Sumerian Sargon Legend* in a very different context to that of the stories of *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah* and *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta*. The beginning of this story is found on one fragmentary clay tablet form Old Babylonian Nippur and possibly finishes on another tablet, but this is a matter of debate. The story is an account of the rise to power of Sargon of Akkad, a historical ruler c.2296-2240BC, and the attempts of Urzababa, the king of Kish, to stop him. One of his attempts to rid himself of Sargon is to write to Lugalzagesi, the king of Umma, another southern Mesopotamian city state, asking him to kill Sargon. Sargon is to take this message to Lugalzagesi, so Urzababa has to prevent him from reading the message en route. To do this Urzababa invents the envelope

[380] Vanstiphout, 2003: 9

"In those days writing on tablets certainly existed, but enveloping tablets did not exist[381]". Although the story does not explicitly state that the envelope was thus invented, the line is clearly a conscious parallel of the passage in *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta* when Enmerkar invents writing, "In those days, writing words on tablets had not existed"[382]. It would seem that this allusion in the *Sumerian Sargon Legend* informed the intended audience that Urzababa invented the envelope[383].

The theme of a person delivering the written orders for their own execution is found elsewhere in literature. As well as the Greek tradition of Bellerophon and the Old Testament story of David and Uriah, this theme is also found in stories from Iceland, Spain, India, Japan, and in the Buddhist tradition[384]. In a related tradition the bearer of the letter alters its contents on the way so that when he arrives at what should be his place of execution he is instead given great honour[385]. Although we know from other narratives that Sargon was not killed by Lugalzagesi, we do not know how he achieved this and there is an unresolved debate whether the second manuscript does indeed continue the story, or is in fact entirely unrelated[386]. It is however historical fact that Umma was conquered by Sargon during the reign of Lugalzagesi.

The idea that writing and all of its associated technologies did not all arrive fully formed together suggests an awareness in the Mesopotamian mind that the beginnings of writing were not quite as straightforward as is suggested in *Enki and Inanna, Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta* or by Berossos. It implies an understanding of the gradual development of writing and its technology over time. This fits with the archaeological evidence from Mesopotamia. For example, analysis of the earliest texts, the Uruk IV & III tablets, shows that writing was not originally capable of rendering spoken language. Writing was first used for very specific tasks for which it was not necessary to be able to write all words and grammar in the language. This only happened when writing began to be used for things other than the purely administrative tasks it was probably originally used for and this happened gradually over a long period of time, at least half a millennium.

[381] Cooper & Heimpel, 1983: 77 (3N T296, line 53)
[382] Cooper & Heimpel, 1983: 82
[383] Alster, 1987: 173
[384] Thompson, 1957: 359
[385] Thompson, 1957: 303
[386] Alster, 1987: 170

It is a coincidence that this story of Sargon seems to agree with the archaeological evidence. The earliest extant example of an envelope is from the Bau temple archive from Girsu, Southern Mesopotamia, and dates to just before the Akkad dynasty[387] (2340-2159BC), of which Sargon was the founder. This dates it almost exactly to the time when the episode in the story is supposed to have happened. There is also another, more tangible connection to the other traditions about writing: Lugalzagesi's personal goddess was Nisaba[388].

Views on the Role of the Scribe

We will now turn our attention to the ancient stories that look at being a scribe. There are stories on this subject from both Egypt and Mesopotamia, although they focus on different aspects of scribal life and training. The Egyptian material, the *Satire of the Trades* and the school texts on *Papyrus Lansing* and *Papyrus Chester Beatty IV,* focuses on what it meant to be a scribe in the Egyptian state administration. The Mesopotamian literature also looks at this in the composition *Schooldays.* As well as this, *Schooldays* along with the three dialogues: *The dialogue between two scribes, The dialogue between a supervisor and scribe,* and *The dialogue between an examiner and a scribe,* gives us an insight into what it would have been like to train as a scribe in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamian literature also shows the place of the scribe in society in *The Gilgamesh Epic,* and in *Enki and the World Order* when discussing the role of their patron goddess Nisaba.

Satire of the Trades (Egypt)

The most famous Egyptian story linked to writing is *The Satire of the Trades*. The best surviving manuscripts of the story are from the second half of the second millennium, namely the 18th & 19th dynasties (c.1550-1186BC), with at least four versions on papyrus, two copies on writing tablets as well as nearly 100 ostraca[389] containing parts of the text. It is believed that this composition originates in an earlier

[387] Postgate, 1992: 61
[388] Steinkeller, 2003: 622
[389] Helck, 1970: 1f

period than the surviving copies, probably the Middle Kingdom (c.2150-1750BC) or possibly even earlier[390]. The reason for the existence of a large number of copies is because the composition was used to train scribes, and not necessarily because it was a popular story in the wider population. We must remember that although this is today called a 'satire', it is biased positively towards the scribal life and can be seen as a kind of propaganda aimed at scribal students. This story is written in the form of a father's advice to his son as he takes him to school to start his scribal education. The advice consists almost exclusively of why all trades other than writing are undesirable and being a scribe is good, ending with a section giving the son general advice on manners and etiquette that will help him get ahead in the bureaucracy.

It should not be surprising that being a professional scribe is praised as the best career for a boy. There is much evidence to suggest that at least the ideal of scribal life was well thought of, with large numbers of the elite commissioning statues of themselves seated in a position that is supposed to make them look like scribes (Fig. 4.1). However, it should be noted that this position is not the pose that most scribes would actually have adopted when writing. In these elite statues the person is shown sitting cross legged, with the papyrus spread on their laps and looking straight at the viewer. From other depictions of scribes, for example from tomb paintings (Fig. 4.2) or models, we find a very different pose is taken. The working scribe is always shown kneeling with his left leg bent up for him to rest his papyrus on, and his eyes are usually fixed on his work. This suggests that although the elite officials wished to emphasise their literacy they did not wish to imply that they were amongst the lowest level of scribe who worked in the field. This is further confirmed by the fact that they are looking straight ahead, which implies that they are not taking dictation from someone more senior but are composing their work themselves[391]. So whilst literacy was seen as a mark of high status there were still different levels between literates depending on the precise nature of their position. This is not unexpected as the type of people commissioning these statues would have almost certainly been in charge of the lower level of scribes, a situation that can often lead to a feeling of social superiority. These different levels of literacy, and the perceived status of being literate will be examined in more depth in Chapter Six.

[390] Wilson, 1955: 432
[391] Wente: 1995: 2213

Figure 4.1 - Statue of a Seated Scribe

Figure 4.2 - Tomb Painting Showing an Egyptian Scribe at Work

However, despite these different levels, it is still clear that all scribes were in some ways seen as being superior to non-literate workers in other professions. Thus in the prologue of *The Satire of the Trades* we are told the father's aim for his son is "to place him in the school of scribes, among the sons of magistrates, with the elite of the residence[392]". This reveals to us that the children attending scribal school are at least thought to generally come from important families: magistrates are high ranking administrators, and the 'residence' refers to the royal household.

In total, 18 different trades are disparaged in the story, and though each has its individual faults there are two themes that run through the insults. The first is physical exhaustion and pain, even in the trades that may not at first seem to be hard physically work, such as making jewellery;

> "When he has finished the inlay of the eye,
> His arms are spent, he's weary;
> Sitting down when the sun goes down,
> His knees and back are cramped."[393]

Manual labour was the norm in pre-modern societies, so most trades would have been physically demanding and the scribes clearly would have recognised this. Although we must remember that the author is exaggerating for comic effect and in order to make his point about the advantages of being a scribe it would not have had the same effect if he did not base his observations in truth.

The other problem with many of the trades from the point of view of the narrator, is that the worker becomes dirty and unclean. The smith "stinks more than fish roe[394]" , the stoker's "eyes are inflamed by much smoke, he cannot get rid of his dirt[395]", and the potter "grubs in the mud more than a pig[396]". Again, while we can assume that the author is exaggerating for comic effect, there is of course truth in this. Being clean was a religious issue in ancient Egypt, and being habitually unclean would make a person less worthy in the eyes of the gods and therefore society. This means that conversely a scribe would be clean and so

[392] Lichtheim, 1975: 185 (4, 1)
[393] Lichtheim, 1975: 186 (5, 1)
[394] Lichtheim, 1975: 186 (4, 5)
[395] Lichtheim, 1975: 188 (8, 1)
[396] Lichtheim, 1975: 186 (5, 5)

have a higher status in society and be looked upon more favourably by the gods.

However, despite the focus on the negative sides of other trades I would argue that the key point comes with this piece of advice:

> "See, there's no profession without a boss,
>
> Except for the scribe; he is the boss…
>
> A peasant is not called a man,
>
> Beware of it![397]"

This is indeed the case. Many tomb paintings and funerary models show a wide variety of different kinds of manual labour and a scribe overseeing and recording is common in these scenes. This implies that the professional scribe supervised ordinary labourers. While he would have had to report to a higher official at some point, during his working day he was in charge of himself and often others. Hence being a scribe carried with it an elevated status and this passage of the piece highlights this.

As if the problems identified with other professions and the opportunity to be the supervisor and gain respect could have failed to make an impact, the material benefits of being a scribe are showcased at the end of the story:

> "Lo, no scribe is short of food
>
> And of riches from the palace….
>
> This is what I put before you,
>
> Your children and their children[398]"

In other words, a scribe will not only have a good and rich life, his children and the generations to come will also become scribes and enjoy the same status and lifestyle as their ancestor. It was usual for a son to take up his father's profession and often inherit his position. A scribe passed on his trade to his descendants just as a blacksmith or a potter would. Thus this story teaches that being a scribe is the best possible profession not only in the short term but for future generations who will all benefit from the decision to learn to write.

[397] Lichtheim, 1975: 189
[398] Lichtheim, 1975: 191 (11, 1)

Papyrus Lansing (Egypt)

The Satire of the Trades may be the best known of the Egyptian compositions encouraging the young to become scribes, but it was by no means the only one. There are other similar pieces, again almost certainly used in the training of scribes. A scribal education also included the indoctrination of social norms and the acceptance of the hierarchical system of society which the future scribes were expected to support and maintain. This is, in some ways, similar to the anthropological arguments discussed in Chapter One, that literates think differently to non-literates, which has actually been proven be a result of the way people are taught, rather than what they are taught. We will discuss two Egyptian texts that show this to have been the case, *Papyrus Lansing* and *Papyrus Chester Beatty IV*.

Papyrus Lansing is a collection of school texts compiled at the end of the second millennium, in the late 20th dynasty (1186-1069BC), and is thought to come from the Memphite region[399]. The papyrus is divided into eleven sections, each praising scribal life in a different way. The papyrus includes a passage in the style of *The Satire of the Trades* which repeats its warnings of exhaustion and filth being the reward of other professions, as well as passages praising the teacher from the perspective of a student.

The second section praises being a scribe and highlights some of the ensuing benefits. A very interesting passage describes the personal pleasure and satisfaction of scribal life:

> "Writing for him who knows it is better than all other professions. It pleases more than bread and beer, more than clothing and ointment. It is worth more than an inheritance in Egypt, than a tomb in the west[400],,

This mirrors the standard list of goods given in the funerary offering formula; bread and beer, oxen and fowl, linen and alabaster or oils, which keep the *ka* of the dead person satisfied. To claim that writing is better than these things is thus very high praise indeed. The ultimate desire of any Egyptian was to be

[399] Forman & Quirke, 1996: 382
[400] Lichtheim, 1976: 168 (2,1)

buried in a well-equipped tomb in the western desert in Egypt. Hence, in the *Story of Sinuhe*[401], the protagonist becomes rich and powerful beyond his wildest dreams whilst living abroad, but his only wish is to be pardoned by the pharaoh so that his body can be returned to Egypt for burial. Such culturally determined ambitions are very strong. While we may hesitate to take the above passage literally, the statement that a knowledge of writing is better than a tomb and its goods clearly illustrates the high esteem that it enjoyed.

The same passage also highlights the status that goes with being a scribe when it states "He makes friends with those greater than he[402]". I would argue that this is indeed one of the key points about being a scribe in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. As in most pre-modern societies, there was a very definite separation between the elite and the peasants. To obtain an entrée large amounts of money and a good relationship with the king or his close associates were required, which effectively restricted social mobility. A scribe, however, had opportunities for advancement through his professional connections with influential people, opportunities largely denied to other professions. This theme of the opportunities of improvement in status and lifestyle is revisited in the eighth section of *Papyrus Lansing*, which proclaims:

> "You are dressed in fine clothes, you own horses. Your boat is on the river; you are supplied with attendants. You stride about inspecting, a mansion is built in your town. You have a powerful office, given you by the king. Male and female slaves are about you[403]"

In reality it is unlikely that many scribes managed to join the elite or enjoy quite this level of riches and luxury. Nevertheless, scribal skills offered at least the possibility of doing so, and if we consider the scribal statues discussed above, it certainly seems that literacy was somehow linked to high social status, something that we will examine in more depth in Chapter Six.

Papyrus Chester Beatty IV (Egypt)

Papyrus Chester Beatty IV is another Egyptian composition praising writers and writing from the late second millennium BC, specifically the 19th Dynasty (1295-1186BC). It is also thought to come from the

[401] Lichtheim, 1975: 222f
[402] Lichtheim, 1976: 168 (1, 1)
[403] Lichtheim, 1976: 171 (8, 5f)

Memphite region[404]. The text includes a particularly interesting passage relevant to the attitudes to and of scribes. It deals with one of the perennial questions in Egyptian thought, that of immortality. The general belief was that as long as some kind of physical reminder of a person's earthly existence remained after death and was viewed or used, then his soul, made up of the *ka* and *ba* would continue to live. However if he was forgotten then the soul would die, which was one of the reasons for the very large and conspicuous funerary structures that those who could afford them had constructed. However the Egyptians realised that even stone monuments were unlikely to stand for all eternity and the worry that they would one day disappear and all would be forgotten is vocalised in several works including *The Harper's Song from the Tomb of King Intef* [405].

This section of *Papyrus Chester Beatty IV* gives an answer to the problem by claiming that the route to true immortality was writing.

> "Their portals and mansions have crumbled,
> Their *ka*-servants are [gone];
> Their tombstones are covered with soil,
> Their graves are forgotten.
> Their name is pronounced over their books,
> Which they made while they had being;
> Good is the memory of their makers,
> It is forever and all time[406]"

Later on there is a list of scribes from the distant past who are still remembered because of their writings, which proves the author's point as many of the names are still familiar to us now because we have copies of their work.

However, as Miriam Lichtheim points out, it is a strange claim to make, not least because nearly all

[404] Forman & Quirke, 1996: 382
[405] Lichtheim, 1976: 176
[406] Lichtheim, 1976: 177 (2, 5)

Egyptian literary works are anonymous[407]. One of the reasons that we are familiar with the names of several of the scribes mentioned in the list is that because it is so rare for them to put their names on a composition close attention is paid when they do sign their work. If writing was seriously considered a route to immortality then we would have expected many more scribes to append their names to their compositions, but this was not the case. However, as a theory it shows a definite awareness of the potential for permanence provided by writing. This papyrus was compiled in the New Kingdom when writing was an old technology and there was physical proof of its permanence, so we should be cautious to apply this sentiment to the early periods of writing.

Schooldays (Mesopotamia)

Mesopotamia also has compositions relating to scribal life and training, and again it seems likely that they were composed specifically for schools as a teaching aid. One of these is the composition now known as *Schooldays*. It is thought that it may date back as far as 2000 BC[408], and has been restored from twenty one tablets and fragments; twenty of these are from Nippur, the final one has an unknown provenance[409]. The composition describes a day at school from the point of view of the student, and the repeated beatings he receives make it clear that he is not doing well in any of his subjects. The schoolboy then persuades his father to invite his teacher to dinner and give him gifts, and so the teacher agrees to continue educating him.

This composition is interesting in several ways, firstly in that it describes a typical school day to us. In the first paragraph the boy gives a description of a day at school:

> " 'I *read* my tablet, ate my lunch,
> prepared my tablet, wrote it, finished it; then
> my *prepared lines were prepared for me*
> (and in) the afternoon, *my hand copies were prepared for me.*
> Upon the school's dismissal, I went home'[410] "

[407] Lichtheim, 1976: 176
[408] Kramer, 1949: 199
[409] Kramer, 1949: 200
[410] Kramer, 1949: 205 (lines 4-8)

Although some of the lines are poorly understood we can get some idea of how scribes were taught to write. It is clear that he first reads a tablet, then prepares a new tablet and writes the exercise. It is probable that the tablet he reads to begin with is what he then goes on to write out, though it may instead be his own work from a previous day that he is reviewing. Unfortunately the translation of this passage is somewhat ambiguous so it is unclear exactly what the student spent the rest of his day doing.

We also learn about the discipline within scribal school from the list of offences for which the pupil gets punished. The first set of infractions are simply bad behaviour; he is caned for talking, for slouching, for sitting down, for leaving the school and for taking something, though what is unknown[411]. He is also punished because of his poor schoolwork; his teacher canes him for his bad handwriting, and his Sumerian teacher also canes him for saying something, though again the text is unclear as to what exactly this is[412]. As this text was probably composed for and used in scribal schools we can assume that while the events are fictional they must have had some kind of basis in reality so the intended audience, scribal trainees, would have found it amusing or cautionary. This means it is likely that physical punishment was a real threat to students, both for bad behaviour and poor work.

What is interesting is that despite his bad behaviour and poor work, all is not lost for the fictional schoolboy. He has something of a change of heart and decides that he wants to improve. To this end the school teacher is invited to the boy's house where he is served a lavish meal, given expensive gifts and flattered by the boy's father. The teacher responds positively to this:

> " 'Young man, because you did not *neglect* my word, did not forsake it,
> May you reach the pinnacle of the scribal art, achieve it completely.
> Because you gave me that which you were by no means obliged (to give),
> you presented me with a gift over and above my earnings, have shown me great honour[413]"

He then goes on to call for Nisaba's blessings and help for the boy, predicting him great success as a scribe.

[411] Kramer, 1949: 205 (lines 35-39)
[412] Kramer, 1949: 205 (lines 40-41)
[413] Kramer, 1949: 206 (lines70-73)

As we think this composition was created to be used in schools we must think about what lessons it may be trying to teach students. It seems that this final section is emphasising that as long as a student has the right attitude towards his elders, one of respect and humility, he can become a great scribe even if he is badly behaved or bottom of the class. This would be a useful lesson to teach students as it would encourage them to behave well in school and respect their teachers, things that are beneficial in any learning environment. It also has implications for later life, if the students are used to the idea that advancement can be gained from respecting those in higher positions then they will be more likely to respect those officials who are in charge of them when they become working scribes. For those in power this would have been desirable as it would have helped to maintain the social hierarchy that provided them with power. It may also have been advantageous from the point of view of the students to learn this lesson as a lack of respect for authority figures would probably have seriously hindered their chances of promotion and advancement.

Dialogues (Mesopotamia)

There are also three other Mesopotamian compositions that deal with aspects of scribal training. These are *The dialogue between two scribes*, *The dialogue between a supervisor and a scribe*, and *The dialogue between an examiner and a student*. They all follow the same format of a discussion between someone in a higher position and someone in a lower position.

The dialogue between two scribes (also known as *Enkimansi and Girnishag* after the two protagonists) has been reconstructed from 7 fragmentary tablets, 5 from Nippur and 2 from Ur[414]. It is in the style of an argument between two scribal students, one of whom is in some way senior to the other, though whether this is because of age, skill or another reason is not explained. Through this argument we learn some of the specific things a student is expected to learn in order to become a scribe[415]. This includes kneading and shaping tablets[416], writing and understanding tablets, writing letters, dividing plots, apportioning fields[417],

[414] Kramer, 1963: 240
[415] Vanstiphout, 1997: 589 (1.184)
[416] Vanstiphout, 1997: 589 (1.184, line 63)
[417] Vanstiphout, 1997: 589 (1.184, lines 19-24)

adding and subtracting[418], and finally how to speak Sumerian[419]. This fits with the other evidence we have about what scribal students were taught, including the archaeological evidence. Many of the extant tablets are thought to be school exercises because, for example, the quality of the writing is poor, or they are short extracts from well-known longer texts. These school tablets cover a range of areas including mathematical exercises to do with area and volume, which would have taught students how to divide and apportion fields; copies of letters, which would have taught them the correct layout and language used in letters; and of course Sumerian literary texts.

The second dialogue, *The dialogue between an examiner and a student* is an oral exam, in which the student is questioned closely about what he knows. Again this gives us an idea of the things that a student was expected to learn in school. However this composition is more explicit and names some of the texts he is supposed to have learnt to read and write in Sumerian and Akkadian; sign lists "from A-A to ME-ME" and the lexical lists d.INANA-TEŠ and LÚ-*šu*[420]. Many examples of these types of lists, including copies of LÚ-*šu*, have been found in excavations across Mesopotamia. The writing style suggests that they were scribal exercises, showing that they really were used to teach people how to write.

The student also tells us the skills he has acquired, similar to the ones listed in *The dialogue between two scribes*, and finally he tells us of his desire to become a professional scribe and the kind of tablets he envisages writing:

> "Tablets of one measure of grain till those of 600 measures;
>
> Tablets of one shekel till those of twenty minas;
>
> Also any marriage contracts they may bring;
>
> And partnership contracts - I can specify verified weights up to a talent,
>
> And also deeds for the sale of houses, gardens, slaves
>
> Financial guarantees, field hire contracts...
>
> Palm growing contracts....

[418] Vanstiphout, 1997: 589 (1.184, line 59)
[419] Vanstiphout, 1997: 589 (1.184, line 61)
[420] Vanstiphout, 1997: 592 (1.186, lines 11-14)

> Adoption contracts - all those I can draw up[421]"

Again, as a school text we can assume that whilst this may not have been the intention of every scribal student it must at least have been the kind of work many of them envisaged for their future. It highlights the areas in which writing was mainly used, or at least perceived to be mainly used, namely economic and legal transactions. At no point in the text do either student or examiner mention writing literature as something that should have been learnt, they are only concerned with the practical skills of the student. It could be argued that the repeated references to his knowing Sumerian may be an allusion to literature as much of it was written in Sumerian. However, because of the other types of skills the student is proud of learning I believe it is likely that Sumerian had a more practical application, for example it was often the language used to draw up legal contracts. The literary texts that we have recovered were mostly likely simply used to practise and improve writing and language skills.

The final dialogue, *The dialogue between a supervisor and a scribe*, is known from 39 different tablets, the majority of which come from Nippur[422]. It is also thought to consist of a school supervisor giving one of the students an oral test[423]. However this idea is not as clear as it is in *The dialogue between an examiner and a student* and a different interpretation may be necessary. The composition is split into three parts, in the first the supervisor is exhorting the scribe to work hard, do what he is told, and maintain his humility. The scribe then responds, seemingly quite annoyed, that he has always worked hard managing the household of the supervisor and done well in whatever tasks he has been set. He finishes by stating :

> "Belittling oneself is what causes people to be ignored; therefore I want to make (my true worth?) apparent for you: learn this![424]".

This seems to be the response that the supervisor wanted as he then praises and blesses the scribe.

However, although the junior person in the conversation is thought to be a scribal student, the description of his work does not once mention writing or the related skills we heard about in previous texts. Instead he manages the estate of the senior person; he supervises both the household staff, designating work and

[421] Vanstiphout, 1997: 593 (1.186, lines 41-48)
[422] http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/section5/b513.htm
[423] Vanstiphout, 1997: 590 (1.185)
[424] Vanstiphout, 1997: 591 (1.185, line 53)

giving out the rations[425], and the field labourers, increasing the quality of produce on the farm[426]. He was also put in charge of the ritual tasks of the household, preparing and making offerings to the supervisor's god[427]. This gives a very different picture of the life of a scribal student to the one we get from other texts. It should also be noted that the junior in this conversation is specifically called a scribe, whereas in the previous two compositions he is specifically labelled as a student. Clearly this composition does not deal with a scribal student as previously thought, but more likely it is a young scribe in his first job with his boss trying to pass on advice to him.

This opens up the interesting possibility that not all people trained to be scribes worked in the 'public' administration of the temple or palace, or even had jobs that were at all dependant on their ability to write. As an estate manager writing would probably have been a helpful skill but almost certainly not a necessary one, particularly if you consider the type of tasks the scribe states that he carries out. We also learn that the 'supervisor' went to school when he was younger as he says the advice he is dispensing was taught to him by his teacher. Unfortunately, although we are told that this is his estate it is not made clear if he is just a landowner or if he holds another, literate, position as well.

The Epic of Gilgamesh (Mesopotamia)

The Mesopotamian literature exposing attitudes towards scribes is rather different to that of Egypt. In Egypt we only find texts that were almost certainly specifically composed for scribal training, whereas in Mesopotamia we find works of a much broader appeal exploring attitudes towards scribes alongside those kind of school texts. One of these is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. A large number of manuscripts of different versions of the story have been found, with some of the most complete copies dating to the Neo-Assyrian period and found in the royal library at Nineveh (7th century BC). For the Old Babylonian period the best known Akkadian manuscripts seem to have come mainly from Sippar[428], while the Sumerian versions come

[425] Vanstiphout, 1997: 591 (1.185, lines 38-39)
[426] Vanstiphout, 1997: 591 (1.185, lines 45-49)
[427] Vanstiphout, 1997: 591 (1.185, lines 42-44)
[428] Shaffer, 1963: 1

from Kish and Nippur[429]. The stories were originally told in Sumerian, but by the Old Babylonian period Akkadian versions that sometimes tell a quite different story, became increasingly popular. Yet part of the Sumerian narrative was in the canonical version of the Akkadian epic, as attributed to Sin-leqe-unnini, and this happens to be the section that interests us in the present context.

In the Sumerian version of this chapter of the story Gilgamesh is playing a game when his ball accidentally lands in the World of the Dead. His servant Enkidu offers to go and retrieve the ball for him and when he eventually returns Gilgamesh questions him about the fate of the dead. However, in the Akkadian version this narrative context is removed, and it is only the conversation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu about the dead that remains. It is an appendix to the epic that has no connection to the previous narrative about Gilgamesh's quest for eternal life. The fact that it is preserved suggests that it deals with issues that were thought important by the later writers.

In the dialogue Gilgamesh asks Enkidu "Did you see the man with one son?", then "did you see the man with two sons[430]," and so on up to seven sons. As the number of sons increases, so Enkidu informs us the happiness and status of the fathers increases. Gilgamesh asks:

> "Did you see the man with five sons?"
>
> [E] "I saw him."
>
> [G] "How does he fare?"
>
> [E] "Like a fine scribe with a *nimble* hand he enters the palace with ease.[431]"

Clearly the more sons a man had the better off he was thought to be, a concept familiar to most ancient societies, and many modern ones. One reason for this in the Mesopotamian tradition is that the more sons a man had, the more people there were to be responsible for his funerary offerings[432]. The Sumerian World of the Dead was not split into a 'heaven' and 'hell' in the way most modern people perceive it. Everybody, regardless of their actions whilst alive, went to the same place and it was not pleasant. It was cold, dark, cramped and there was no food or water. The only way to enjoy some form of comfort there was if your

[429] Kramer, 1944b: 11-12
[430] George, 2003: 187 (Tablet XII, lines 255f)
[431] George, 2003: 188 (Tablet XII, line 263)
[432] George, 2003: 177

family made sacrifices to you in the form of funerary offerings. Of course the more family members you had to do this for you, the more comfortable you would be.

But as well as this there were the considerations of the living; the more sons a person had, the more people there would have been to share the work and also to care for the parents in old age. Thus having five sons would have implied a life of prosperity and security whilst both alive and dead. To find the scribe linked to the fortunate father of five sons shows that as a profession it was considered to give one a good life. The comment that the scribe is able to "enter the palace with ease" also shows that, just like in Egypt, a scribe had opportunities for meeting the powerful and well-connected members of society, and therefore gaining social advancement. Respect for scribal skill is also seen in a similar way in Mesopotamia as it was in Egypt. In the Old Babylonian period the cylinder seals belonging to the top ranking administrators refer to them as being 'scribes'[433] alongside other titles they are entitled to. This suggests that here it is literacy that is being highlighted rather than a simple position within the administrative system. If these individuals thought it necessary of worthwhile to make this clear on their seals amongst their official titles it shows that literacy was highly valued, whatever your status may have been. The possible reasons for this will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

It has also been suggested that the number of sons may have another meaning. Karen Radner sees the link between the number of sons and the position of the father in the World of the Dead as being fundamentally related to the Mesopotamian view of the world. So, for example, of the man with only one son it is said "He weeps bitterly at the wooden peg which was driven into his wall.[434]". This is because in Mesopotamian law a peg was driven into the wall of a house to show that it had been sold or transferred[435]. As this man only had one son the future of his estate is uncertain. With each of the fathers the number of sons can be related to the Mesopotamian world view, so the father with five sons is linked to scribes because there are five fingers on the hand that holds the stylus[436]. Of course these ideas are not mutually exclusive. Although each of the examples can be shown to numerically relate to something about the Mesopotamian world they

[433] Michalowski, 1991: 51
[434] Black et al, 2004: 37 (line 255)
[435] Radner, 2005: 83
[436] Radner, 2005: 84

do still show an increase in prosperity alongside the increase in the number of sons. Thus the man with seven sons "sits on a throne and listens to judgements[437]", clearly a step up from the man with five sons who can simply enter the palace, and in a much better position than the man with one son who does not know if his name and estate will be continued.

Enki and the World Order (Mesopotamia)

The final story which informs us about the role and status of scribes in Mesopotamia is *Enki and the World Order*. This is preserved on one large tablet from 18th century BC Nippur, with some small lacunae[438]. In this story Enki is given the task of organising the world by his brother, the supreme god Enlil. This involves Enki distributing the 'me's' throughout the world, which reinforces the idea already encountered in *Enki and Inanna* that these are under his control. The majority of the me's are linked to the world of food production[439]. This is an interesting concept for a story. The world of the gods is of course imagined by humans and so reflects human concerns. However, the world that the gods are seen to create here is an idealised one, and so rather than seeing it as the world humans have created, it can be seen as the world that humans would want to inhabit.

In one of the final sections of *Enki and the World Order* Enki distributes different responsibilities to some of the goddesses for them to control. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the 3rd millennium Nisaba was the patron goddess of scribes, and here we find her roles being assigned:

> "My illustrious sister, holy Nisaba, is to get the measuring reed. The lapis lazuli measuring tape is to hang over her arm. She is to proclaim all the great powers. She is to demarcate boundaries and mark borders. She is the be the scribe of the Land. The planning of the gods' meals is to be in her hands[440]"

This is a rather surprising list of tasks for the goddess of scribes to be in charge of as not once is writing mentioned. The focus here is quite clearly on the measuring and laying out of fields and the working out of

[437] Black et al, 2004: 38 (line 267)
[438] Averbeck, 2003: 26
[439] Wiggermann, 2011: 674
[440] Black et al., 2004: 224 (lines 412-417)

yields. These are all things that we know scribes were taught how to do as examples of their school exercises have been discovered. This story is an expression of an idealised version of Mesopotamia[441] and we must assume that the divine scribe is a perfect version of the human scribe. This passage therefore gives us insight into what the roles of scribe were considered to be.

The idealised version of a scribe is someone who measures and sets boundaries, rather than someone who simply writes. This brings us back to the role that the Egyptian goddess Seschat played in the measuring and laying out of temples, as discussed in Chapter Three. These duties all also draw Nisaba into the realm of administration. By measuring and deciding borders she plays an important role in taxation, as this was based on the harvest expected from each farm. She is also linked to the idea of record keeping by the final sentence. The feeding of the gods was a major undertaking, a key part of which would have involved keeping track of what was going in and out of the temple storehouses. This of course brings us back to writing, as it seems likely that, in Mesopotamia, it was for similar reasons that writing was invented in the first place. It also quite clearly shows the link between the two aspects if Nisaba, accounting and grain.

Conclusions

The literary compositions that deal with writing, literacy and scribes from Egypt and Mesopotamia date to very different periods. Much of the Egyptian material dates to the late second millennium BC. However, apart from the late first millennium BC *Babyloniaca* of Berossos, the Mesopotamian material all dates to the early second millennium BC, although at least the dialogue between Gilgamesh and Enkidu was transmitted long after that period.

Why are there so few compositions in Egypt from before the New Kingdom that deal with these topics? That most of the known Egyptian compositions date to the late second millennium could well be a reflection of the survival patterns of papyri. Unless kept in very dry, stable conditions, such as a desert tomb, papyrus can quickly disintegrate. Most of the manuscripts we are studying are school texts, intended specifically to encourage trainee scribes. As school texts they are not necessarily the type of compositions

[441] Averbeck, 2003: 758

we would expect to find in tombs. Many of these school texts were probably found in settlement sites, but few early settlement sites have been excavated in Egypt. Unlike funerary sites which are in the desert, settlement sites are almost all to be found in the Nile Valley and so often lie beneath areas that are still settled today. To fully excavate these sites would require the eviction of whole communities. It is also more difficult to excavate earlier periods. As each era builds on top of the proceeding ones it is the earliest periods that lie at the bottom, so they are more difficult to reach and more likely to be damaged. In Lower Egypt the problem is further compounded by the high water table. Once below the water table it is very difficult and expensive to excavate a site, and organic materials such as papyri will be unlikely to have survived. Thus this literature or similar material may well have existed in periods before the New Kingdom but has simply not survived or been recovered.

The dating of the Mesopotamian literature to the early second millennium can also be explained. The earliest attested written literature in Mesopotamia dates to the Early Dynastic III period[442] (c.2600-2300BC). However, much of the evidence for the literary corpus does not date further back than the Old Babylonian period (c.2000-1600BC) as it comes from scribal schools where it was used as a teaching aid. During the Old Babylonian period the bureaucracy and administration of Mesopotamia was greatly increased. This called for a larger number of scribes, which in turn called for a larger number of scribal schools and students. Thus the evidence for this scribal training, including literary texts, is far higher than for proceeding periods. This does not necessarily mean that these texts were not used in similar settings in earlier periods, but there would be fewer incidences of this happening. As with Egypt, excavation patterns may also play a role here. Excavations on the southern Mesopotamian sites where this evidence may be found has not always been systematic, and again the high water table in the region means excavating layers prior to the Old Babylonian period can often be difficult. The combination of fewer tablets to find, and in deposits that may be less accessible, could explain why earlier versions of this literature has not been uncovered.

As for why there are few or no later versions of these stories, they are all part of the Sumerian literary

[442] Postgate, 1992: 66

tradition. With the exception of the dialogue between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that was incorporated into the canonical version of *The Gilgamesh Epic*, none of these Sumerian compositions were ever translated or adapted into Akkadian. This coincides with Nabu's usurpation of the position of divine scribe, and reflects the wider cultural changes in writing and literacy in Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period. It is during this period that cuneiform writing completes its move from the purely practical task of record keeping, letter writing and the composition of official inscriptions towards a tool of social differentiation, with a scribal education the hallmark of members of the urban elite and a pre-requisite of a high administrative office. There is also an increasing focus on the learned aspects of writing. However, the wealth in surviving manuscripts is owing to the fact that many private archives of the Old Babylonian period have been uncovered in southern Mesopotamian cities and it is there that we find these works as part of the contemporary trend of keeping school texts. After the Old Babylonian period literary texts as part of private archives largely disappear from the archaeological record, reflecting hitherto poorly understood dynamics in scribal education. Yet the survival of the Gilgamesh dialogue and the information contained in Berossos's *Babyloniaca* demonstrates that the views contained in the literature of the early second millennium had not lost their relevance in the first millennium BC.

The literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia has shown both similarities and differences in the way each society viewed writing. The most striking difference concerns the invention of writing. This does not feature in Egyptian literature, it was simply believed that Thoth had created writing and passed the skill on to man. In Mesopotamia, however, we find several different explanations for how writing came to be invented. This may be because of the different types of writing that were in use in both regions.

In Egypt, two scripts were used: hieroglyphs and hieratic. Hieroglyphs was the script used by the gods, this was the script that Thoth invented. Hieratic was the script used by humans, it was derived from hieroglyphs and its invention does not seem to have been discussed in Egyptian literature or religious works. In Mesopotamia humans wrote with cuneiform; as we saw in Chapter Three, if the gods wished to communicate they wrote messages in the skies using astral bodies. All of the stories from Mesopotamia that explain the invention of writing are discussing cuneiform. Thus in Egypt the invention of hieroglyphs is not

found in literature as it was invented by the gods for their own use. In Mesopotamia, even when writing is said to have been invented by the gods it is invented for humans to use, and so it is something that is mentioned in the literature. These different scripts in use in both Egypt and Mesopotamia are in fact crucial to understanding the ancient views on the role of writing, and is something that we shall return to in later chapters.

Chapter 5: Writing as a Recording System, Writing as a Creative Tool

The aim of this thesis is to examine the perceptions of writing within the first societies to use it, to see if they differ from modern perceptions. One of the questions to ask is what associations did writing hold for people? As a new invention writing was completely open to interpretation and categorisation, whereas in the modern world its centrality to our entire society brings with it many preconceptions. If we can understand what ancient people associated writing with, how they perceived it within the context of already known activities, and if it was seen differently from other recording systems, we will have a better understanding of how writing was viewed in general.

We will begin by looking at writing in the context of recording systems, that is systems which were used in Egypt and Mesopotamia both before and alongside writing to record information. This will help us to place writing itself within the wider context of information and record keeping in each society. Doing so will enable us to build a picture of how these activities were perceived by society. We will then look at the evidence for the creative associations of writing; to what extent did the use of writing as a creative tool affect its development? Did it have an impact on the role of writing? And did this differentiate it from other recording systems?

Writing as a recording system

Writing is simply one way of solving the problem of recording and storing information, so we should expect to see other recording systems in use both before and after the invention of writing. The evidence from both Egypt and Mesopotamian shows us that this was indeed the case. In this section we will examine these alternative systems in order to understand the wider context within which the invention of writing should be viewed. This will give us a better understanding of the ancient perceptions of recording systems as a whole, allowing us to see if writing was thought to be different to these other systems or merely a

continuation of the same ideas. We should not automatically view these alternative recording systems as precursors to writing, or imperfect attempts to solve the problem of recording and storing information. They should instead be seen as parallel systems that met the needs of the users in the contexts in which they were employed.

From Egypt we have evidence of two recording systems: seals and pottery marks. Both of these systems were in use in Egypt before writing was invented, and both systems continued to be used throughout dynastic history and later. We also have evidence of seals and pottery marks from Mesopotamia. Indeed these technologies can be found in various forms in pre- and post-literate societies across the world. We will also investigate another recording system from Mesopotamia, tokens and bullae, which does not seem to have had an Egyptian parallel.

Seals and Sealings

Seals were used in Egypt and Mesopotamia both before and after the introduction of writing. Stamp seals and cylinder seals were both used, but during the period we are examining, the late fourth millennium BC, cylinder seals predominated. Cylinder seals are small cylinders that have been carved with a design; when rolled over a pliable material, such as clay, they leave an impression of this design in relief[443]. This impression is known as a sealing, and many of these seals and sealings survive in the archaeological record. The extant examples of cylinder seals are made of stone or occasionally ivory, but it has been argued that early seals may also have been made of wood, bone, or other perishable materials[444]. The size, designs, and use of seals varies over time and geographical location, but the basic function of these seals seems to have remained constant: they were a way of marking responsibility and/or ownership[445].

Because of the nature of seals and sealings the designs they depict were individualised so it was clear who had responsibility for the item in question. Seals were often very detailed, presumably to ensure that fraud

[443] Porada, 1993: 563
[444] Collon, 2005: 14
[445] Collon, 2005: 113

could not be committed by someone simply having a replica seal made. The seals were sometimes the property of a specific individual, or else belonged to an office and could only be used by the office holder. These seals would have only been available to a very small number of people, and could not have been used without the permission of the seal holder.

Cylinder seals seem to have originated in Mesopotamia, where the earliest sealings are found on bullae (see below) from the second half of the 4th millennium BC. These earliest seals are known as Uruk Style Seals (Fig. 5.1) after the city in southern Mesopotamia where the dominant site of this period was excavated[446]. Seals of a similar date have also been found at the site of Jemdet Nasr (Fig. 5.2). Whilst they overlap chronologically with the Uruk seals[447], they are stylistically very different. Although named after these two cities, both styles have been found at other sites throughout the Near East, though the Jemdet Nasr Style Seals have a wider distribution[448]. The Uruk Style Seals are often surmounted by a knob, either in the shape of an animal or a shape that might depict the end of a metapodial bone. This may reflect the earlier tradition of carving seals from bones[449]. They are also large in comparison to seals of other periods, the example shown (Fig. 5.1) is 5.3cm long (8.5cm including knob) and 4.6cm in diameter[450], compared to an average from all other periods of 2-3 cm long and 1-2cm in diameter[451]. The Jemdet Nasr Style Seals are of average size, and often made from dark, hard stones. They are pierced through the middle as is the norm for cylinder seals in later periods[452].

[446] Collon, 2005: 13
[447] Collon, 2005: 14
[448] Collon, 2005: 16
[449] Collon, 2005: 14
[450] Collon, 2005: 14
[451] Collon, 1997: 16
[452] Collon, 2005: 15

Figure 5.1 - Uruk Style Seal

Figure 5.2 - Jemdet Nasr Style Seal

Uruk Style Seals are found only in southern Mesopotamia and the cities in the north connected to Uruk via the major trade routes. In the Early Dynastic period (c.3000-2334BC) the distribution of cylinder seals in Mesopotamia changed. In the late 4th millennium BC the trade routes moved to run from Susa in south west Iran, through the Diyala region and northern Mesopotamia, to Syria and Palestine, bypassing Uruk and

southern Mesopotamia entirely. After this shift we find that the sites along the trade routes are linked by a new style of cylinder seals depicting geometric designs, although each site also retained its own local figurative traditions alongside this[453]. There is very little evidence for seals and sealings at Uruk in this period. Although this may be an accident of archaeology the city seems to have played little or no role in the new trade route[454]. This suggests that the seals were particularly used by or associated with these trade networks. We originally find the seals at sites situated along the trade route; when the route changes, the distribution of seals and sealings also changes to mirror these routes.

It was not only in Mesopotamia that there was a link between seals and the trade network, this was also the case in Egypt. Some of our earliest evidence for the use of seals and sealings in Egypt comes from cemetery U at Abydos. Sealings were found in several tombs from the Naqada IId period (c.3480BC), as well as tombs U-g and U-j which date to the subsequent Naqada IIIa2 period[455] (c.3380BC). In tomb U-j the sealings were found alongside imported storage jars. The sealings are on pieces of clay with impressions of string and jar rims on the back, suggesting they had originally been used to fasten the jars shut[456]. As discussed above these seals were only available to the person or official who owned or was in charge of them, or those to whom they gave permission. Placing seals on these fastenings would have acted as a security measure. For someone to gain access to what was stored in the containers they would have had to break the sealings on the outside. If the person did not have permission to open the containers they would not have had access to the seal, and so would not have been able to re-seal them. This would have made it immediately obvious that the vessels had been opened without authorisation.

The designs of five different seals have been reconstructed from the fragmentary sealings found in tomb U-j[457]. They each consist of a central panel containing animals, and in one case a human, along with more obscure symbols, surrounded by a wide geometric border (Fig. 5.3). As well as single sealings, double

[453] Collon, 2005: 20
[454] Collon, 2005: 20
[455] Hill, 2004: 19-23
[456] Hartung, 2002: 437
[457] Hill, 2004: 22

sealings have been found that use two seals also found individually in the tomb[458]. This implies that these seals were being used together in the same place, and because of the nature of seals we can assume they represent two different individuals or offices.

Figure 5.3 - Copy of a Sealing From Tomb U-j, Abydos

The sealings found in U-j were made with Nile mud[459], and so the jars must have been sealed in Egypt. However, study of the jars themselves, through both chemical analysis and archaeological comparison, shows that they originated in Palestine[460]. The original contents of the jars, wine, also points to a Palestinian origin, as viticulture was not fully developed in Egypt until at least Dynasty 0[461] (c.3300-3120BC). This tells us that the Egyptians were importing wine from Palestine, and at some point after the jars had entered Egypt they were sealed. We know that in the case of U-j these jars were sealed with five different seals. At least some of these seals were being used at the same time and place, as they created double sealings. I would argue that this means the sealing was carried out in some kind of official administrative or institutional setting. If it were an individual practice, for example a person had all his wine jars sealed when storing them, we would expect to see just one seal being used, not a variety of different seals. However as a part of an administrative system, on whatever scale that may be, we would

[458] Hartung, 2002: 444
[459] Hartung, 2002: 442
[460] Hartung, 2002: 438
[461] Hartung, 2002: 441

expect to find several seals were being used. The different seals on the wine jars may show that they had entered this administrative system at different times or through different routes, thus being sealed by different people.

Pottery Marks

Alongside tags and sealings, the other recording system found in Pre-Dynastic Egypt is pottery marks. Again, some of our best evidence for this comes from tomb U-j. Three main groups of pottery have been identified in the tomb; Egyptian wavy-handled jars, various types of rough Nile silt ware, and large storage jars imported from Palestine[462]. It is the Egyptian wavy-handled jars that particularly interest us here, as most have one or two signs painted on them in black ink (Fig. 5.4). There are two different groups of wavy-handled jars from the tomb, large and small[463]. Although most of the vessels were broken in antiquity the excavators have calculated that all of the large jars and about 85% of the smaller jars were originally marked[464]. As well as the vessels found in tomb U-j, a total of twelve fragments with black ink inscriptions were found elsewhere in cemetery U by the German excavations, spread across eight other tombs[465]. A further four complete wavy-handled vessels with black ink inscriptions were excavated in the earlier French excavations at Abydos[466]. It is thought that these vessels probably originated in tomb U-j, but their find spot was not recorded when they were excavated so this cannot be confirmed[467].

Figure 5.4 - A Pottery Mark From Tomb U-j, Abydos

[462] Dreyer, 1992: 296
[463] Dreyer, 1998: 22
[464] Dreyer, 1998: 47
[465] Dreyer, 1998: 80
[466] Dreyer, 1998: 83
[467] Dreyer, 1998: 47

There are several different signs and sign groups painted on the vessels. The most numerous sign is a scorpion, with c.60 extant examples[468], but other animals, birds, plants and boats are also found[469]. However, the corpus of signs painted onto these jars is much smaller than the corpus of signs used to incise the bone and ivory tags discussed in Chapter Two. The small number of signs and the fact they only appear individually or in pairs suggests that this was not a full writing system. Many scholars, such as Kathryn Bard, argue it is simply an identification system[470], as using a small number of signs leaves little scope for recording grammatical information. This makes longer, more complex statements unlikely, and means that the information was probably not 'read' in the true sense of the word. It is argued that these marks do form part of a recording system, but there is no consensus as to their meanings.

The excavator of U-j, Günter Dreyer, has suggested readings for some of these signs. He argues that the system was designed to give information on the provenance of the product in the jars[471]. This is based on the Early Dynastic system of Egyptian pottery marks on wavy-handled jars where they are known to denote provenance, quality and the name of the ruling king[472]. Dreyer argues that the marks from U-j do not give us information on the quality of the products within the jars, as they all seem to have contained the same thing, vegetable oil[473]. He also argues that the signs could not give the name of the ruling king as there are a lot of different combinations of signs and they all date to roughly the same time. This would mean there was an extraordinary number of kings in a short period of time, something for which there is no other evidence. Thus, Dreyer concludes, the only possible explanation is that the signs give us the provenance of the jars and their contents[474]. He also suggests readings for some of the sign groups, again based on the later pottery mark system and hieroglyphs, arguing that the tree sign means an estate, and when combined with another sign specifies which estate[475]. Thus the most common pair of signs found in the corpus, a scorpion and a tree, is read by Dreyer 'estate of (king) Scorpion'[476].

[468] Dreyer, 1998: 48-51
[469] Dreyer, 1998: 47
[470] Bard, 1992: 299
[471] Dreyer, 1998: 85
[472] Dreyer, 1998: 84
[473] Dreyer, 1998: 84
[474] Dreyer, 1998: 85
[475] Dreyer, 1998: 85
[476] Dreyer, 1998: 86

However, the use of the later hieroglyphic system as a basis for assumptions about earlier systems is problematic. There is always a serious methodological problem with any idea that works back from the evidence of later periods and tries to apply those ideas to much earlier evidence. The final meaning of a symbol can be very misleading as to its origins. This is particularly true for the early periods of writing in Egypt as we know that early on in its existence, around late Dynasty 0 (c.3120BC), the hieroglyphic system went through the first of several major reforms, and did not become stabilised until around late Dynasty 2/early Dynasty 3[477] (c.2730-2544BC). This could mean that the use and meaning of certain symbols changed drastically so we cannot, and must not, rely on later readings to give us our earlier readings. The fact that some of the symbols used in earlier systems later appear in the hieroglyphic system cannot be seen as proof of their meaning in this period. It would be only natural for the Egyptians to have used signs and symbols they were already familiar with when inventing hieroglyphs and so some amount of overlap is to be expected.

It is clear from the different sign corpora that the system being used on these pots is not the same as the system that is used on the bone and ivory tags also found in tomb U-j. It has been argued by John Baines that U-j may in fact contains the early stages of two writing systems. In dynastic Egypt hieroglyphs were used for monumental inscriptions and religious works. Most other writings, including administrative and accounting texts, were written in the hieratic script. As we will see in Chapter Six it was hieratic that Egyptian scribal students were taught, with only a few specialists learning how to read and write hieroglyphs. Baines has argued that the Pre- and Early Dynastic pot marks found at Abydos and elsewhere are related to the recording system used on the tags in the same way that hieroglyphs and hieratic are related; they are separate systems but "systematically almost identical and mutually convertible[478]".

This argument has been echoed by David Wengrow, who agrees that tomb U-j contains two writing systems, which are distinct but compatible. He argues that the systems can be differentiated by whether the signs are painted or incised. The system painted onto the wavy-handled jars uses a much smaller number of

[477] Baines, 2004: 164
[478] Baines, 2004: 159

signs than the system incised on the tags. These two groups of objects were also kept spatially separate from each other, suggesting they were not being used as a part of the same system[479]. It may well be the case that U-j contains the origins of more than one writing system. However this must remain speculation for the present as neither system is fully understood. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that the tomb contains more than one recording system.

Pottery marks were also used on Mesopotamian pottery, starting in the first half of the 4th millennium BC[480]. Unfortunately there is no proper corpus of Near Eastern pottery marks as there is for Egypt, and the two largest known assemblages, from Tell el-Abd and Tell es-Sweyhat in the middle Euphrates region in Syria, remain unpublished[481]. What is clear is that the practice of marking pots is rarely attested in Mesopotamia[482]. The biggest difference between the Egyptian and Near Eastern assemblages seems to be the context for which they were intended. It seems that in Pre-Dynastic Egypt the marked pottery was exclusively intended for placement in graves, though this has not been definitively proven as the pottery assemblages from domestic sites in the region around Thinis have yet to be published[483]. In Mesopotamia it seems that marked pottery was only placed in graves through the re-use of domestic pottery[484], and that the marks were placed on the vessels for several different reasons, all of which relate to production and/or domestic use[485].

A recent study by Claudia Glatz, focusing on second millennium pottery marks from ancient Anatolia, has critically examined their function. There are two main interpretations for the meaning of these kind of marks, either they are intended to communicate information to the user or consumer[486], or they were intended to communicate information during the production process but not afterwards[487]. Glatz argues that

[479] Wengrow, 2006: 202
[480] Kolinski, 2003: 87
[481] Kolinski, 2003: 88
[482] Wagensonner, 2009: 33
[483] Kolinski, 2003: 89
[484] Kolinski, 2003: 88
[485] Kolinski, 2003: 90
[486] Glatz, 2012: 6
[487] Glatz, 2012: 8

these marks were in fact a part of the production process[488], rather than a way to communicate to consumers. If the marks were part of a large scale centralised system intended to communicate information at a later stage to the consumer then we would expect to find marks on all or most of the pots[489]. This is not the case in Anatolia, where in fact only a very small proportion of pots have marks[490]. They may instead have been used as a way of differentiating the maker of individual pots during production[491], for example if they were fired in a communal kiln[492]. This would require far fewer pots to be marked, and as it was being carried out on a local level the marks would not form a cohesive state wide system, as is the case in Anatolia.

However, we must remember that Glatz's study relates specifically to marks made before the pot was fired, and in assemblages where only a small percentage have these marks[493]. This is clearly a very different system than that found at Abydos, where almost all of the assemblage is marked, and the marks were made post-firing with ink. In comparison to the Mesopotamian pottery marks there may be a closer link as there the marks are certainly pre-firing marks. Also, from what we do know of the pottery assemblage excavated at Tell es-Sweyhat, only about 400 out of the c.5100 vessels and shards found bore these marks[494]. This is just under 8% of the assemblage, not a very large proportion. It would seem, therefore, that the evidence from Mesopotamia suggests that pottery marks were being used there in a similar way to Anatolia, i.e. they were a part of the production process rather than information for the consumer. Of course this does raise questions about the marks painted onto the Egyptian pottery. If this was done post-firing and placed on nearly all of the pots could this suggest they were trying to communicate information to the consumer? The fact that they were almost certainly intended for a funerary context may suggest otherwise, or at least suggests a very different type of audience.

[488] Glatz, 2012: 32
[489] Glatz, 2012: 32
[490] Glatz, 2012: 15
[491] Glatz, 2012: 32
[492] Glatz, 2012: 8
[493] Glatz, 2012: 6
[494] Kolinski, 2003: 88

Tokens and Bullae

The other extant recording system is that of tokens and bullae. This system was wide-spread in the Near East but has no known Egyptian parallels. It has been argued by the archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat that writing developed from this system in Mesopotamia. Small clay objects in a variety of shapes and sizes have been found throughout the entire of the Near East, from Turkey to Iran, dating back as far as 8,000 BC[495] (Fig. 5.5). These are Schmandt-Besserat's 'tokens', and the different shapes are said to represent different commodities. These tokens would have been used to account for the movement of goods by working as a kind of receipt, but a way of keeping groups of them together was required. This was the function of the 'bullae', spherical clay envelopes inside which the tokens were sealed (Fig. 5.6). Once the tokens were safely sealed within the bulla there was no way of being sure what exactly was inside without breaking them open, which risked losing some of the tokens. This problem was overcome by impressing the same tokens onto the outside of the bulla as a record before sealing them inside. The theory is that it was eventually realised that the tokens themselves were obsolete and all that was needed was the piece of clay with the impressions: this led to the cuneiform script.

Figure 5.5 - Mesopotamian Tokens

[495] Schmandt-Besserat, 1996: 7

Figure 5.6 - Mesopotamian Bulla

Yet the evidence for this development is not as strong as Schmandt-Besserat claims. Of the 237 types and subtypes of tokens that Schmandt-Besserat identifies only 11 have more than 10 extant examples and so her critics argue that the theory should only be applied to these[496]. In fact it seems that few of the objects which Schmandt-Besserat describes as clay tokens were actually used to impress clay bullae. Only the solid spheres and cones seem to have been used for this and so other scholars argue that only these should be counted as tokens[497]. These arguments gain ground from further evidence that some of the objects labelled by Schmandt-Besserat as tokens are most certainly not, some having been identified as decorative beads and others even as small labels that have actual writing on them[498].

As well as this, 73% of the small clay objects used by Schmandt-Besserat are from Iran, with less than 10% from the Uruk region where the earliest writing is found[499]. In fact the only site at which all the stages of Schmandt-Besserat's theory seems to be observable is Susa in Iran, but crucially there is no evidence of the last stage, the transformation to writing. The archaeological strata of Susa actually suggests the opposite, namely that writing on bullae began by being copied from writing on tablets[500]. Cuneiform develops under the western influence of Uruk rather than the eastern influence of Susa, so if Schmandt-Besserat's theory of

[496] Glassner, 2003: 76
[497] Lieberman, 1980: 341
[498] Glassner, 2003: 8
[499] Lieberman, 1980: 353
[500] Glassner, 2003: 116

the origin of writing is correct it is more likely to apply to the proto-Elamite script used in the Susa region[501], a slightly later (c.3100-2900BC[502]) and rather different system to Sumerian cuneiform.

Another problem is that not all of the tokens and bullae predate writing, some appear in the archaeological record after the appearance of writing, which means they cannot be counted as precursors[503]. It seems more likely that the tokens were a parallel system. There is some evidence that this system was taught in the scribal schools. The Sumerian word for these tokens was *imna*, literally 'clay pebble'[504], and lexical texts (Old Babylonian Lu-Series, Recension A & D) list a 'man of the *imna*' amongst school staff, suggesting that this skill was being taught to the students alongside writing as late as the early second millennium[505].

A further indication that the system of tokens and bullae used in the Near East seems to have been a parallel system to writing rather than a precursor comes from the mid-second millennium site of Nuzi[506] in northern Mesopotamia, long after writing began. From this site we have two different versions of the same contract for sheep that had been given to a shepherd to tend. One version is written on a tablet[507] and the other is in the form of a bulla and tokens[508]. The bulla would have been the shepherd's version of the contract and the tablet kept by the owner of the sheep. When the shepherd returned the sheep at the end of the allotted period his bulla should have been broken open and compared to the owner's tablet. This would have been used to prove that the shepherd had not stolen any of the sheep or otherwise tried to deceive the owner[509].

Conclusions

It seems clear that the alternative recording systems used in both Egypt and Mesopotamia fulfilled very

[501] Lieberman, 1980: 353
[502] Stolper, 2008: 52
[503] Lieberman, 1980: 339
[504] ePSD: http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html
[505] Lieberman, 1980: 349
[506] Oppenheim, 1959: 121
[507] Lacheman, 1958: no. 311
[508] Lacheman, 1958: no. 449
[509] Glassner, 2003: 117

specific functions. Seals were used as a form of protection and to mark ownership or responsibility, pottery marks provided information to a target audience at a specific point in the vessel's life, and tokens and bullae were used to help keep track of commodities. Each of these systems was perfectly suited to its own context, and we know that all of them were used for centuries, and in some cases millennia, with very little change. In the modern world, all of the functions for which these alternative recording systems were utilised have been largely overtaken by one technology, writing. We use writing to mark ownership and to protect us legally, for example in the form of signatures or contracts. We use writing to provide information about goods, their production, and consumption. We use writing to keep track of commodities as they are moved around. Yet even after the invention of writing, these ancient societies continued to use these alternative systems.

In some areas this may have been because of practicality, for example it is much easier to impress a seal in a contract written on clay than to write a signature. However, I would argue that it is at least in part because of the way that writing was viewed. In its earliest phases writing was just another recording system that was effective within the context it was used. Overall it was considered no better or worse than the other recording systems we have been examining, and so each system continued to be used in its own way. This is why it took so long for the uses of writing to spread to other areas, and why the alternative recording systems continued to be used alongside writing, it simply was not considered advantageous to replace them. Writing had its place, just as e.g. pottery marks did, and for a long time no one even considered using it in other contexts. In the modern world this is no longer the case, writing is so pervasive in our culture that it has a different status to other recording systems. This preconception that writing is the best recording system is held, consciously or not, by most, if not all, modern scholars who study writing. In order to truly understand the impact of writing on ancient societies we must recognise this bias and try to work around it.

What is striking about the evidence for seals and sealing in Egypt and Mesopotamia are the parallels in use. Although we cannot know exactly how and why these seals were being used and what they meant, we do know that in both regions the seals were used as a part of long-distance trade. In Mesopotamia the seals and sealings are found distributed along the main trade routes of the late 4th millennium BC, and the evidence

for seal use moves as the trade route does. In Egypt, in the same period, we find that they are sealing imported storage jars as they enter the region, the last stage in this particular branch of the trade network. This is interesting in the light of the fact that the technology of seals originated in Mesopotamia and found its way to Egypt through trade between the two regions[510]. It has also been argued that writing developed in Mesopotamia and from there travelled to Egypt, rather than the Egyptians inventing it independently[511]. Although this argument has been discredited[512], it certainly was the case for seals, which were in use in Mesopotamia before Egypt, and are thought to have at least inspired the Egyptian seals[513]. Both regions were looking for ways to deal with the same problem, that of marking possession, and so when one area solved the problem the other followed.

However, this was not the case for writing. If the Egyptians had taken the idea to write from Mesopotamia and were attempting to solve the same problem, i.e. administration, then we would expect the Egyptians to adopt cuneiform. That was the choice made by many other cultures who came into contact with Mesopotamia and cuneiform, such as Elam, Hatti and Urartu[514]. Ancient Egyptian is an Afroasiatic language with many similarities to Semitic languages[515], so cuneiform would have been just as suitable for rendering it as Semitic Akkadian. Yet this is not what happened. When the Egyptians began to write it was with a completely Egyptian script, one that had developed to fulfill the role needed in Egypt. This was not purely administrative but also very closely linked to display, hierarchy and ideology. People in Egypt were attempting to solve different problems to people in Mesopotamia, and so they devised a very different system of writing.

It is also crucial for modern scholars to remember that the Egyptians and Mesopotamians creating these writing systems did not necessarily see them as very similar at all. We are now so familiar with the concept of writing and different scripts it appears clear to us that these are both writing systems, essentially two versions of the same idea. The ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians were not familiar with our concept of

[510] Wengrow, 2006: 187
[511] Ray, 1985: 309
[512] Baines, 1988: 195
[513] Collon, 2005: 140
[514] Veldhuis, 2012: 7
[515] Baines, 2012: 29

writing, and may well have not seen the conceptual link between the two systems of hieroglyphs and cuneiform that is so obvious to us. It is more likely that they saw hieroglyphs and cuneiform as two entirely different recording systems, which had as much in common as e.g. seals and pottery marks. We cannot say that the Egyptians encountered cuneiform and decided to develop their own version, as without a comprehension of what writing was they would not have necessarily realised that it was possible. If they had wanted a system that did the same things as cuneiform they would have used cuneiform, just as they had adopted cylinder seals when they needed to solve the problem of marking possession. The very fact that they did not simply choose cuneiform shows that they wanted a recording system they could use in a different way. If we accept that they also did not have a concept of 'the writing system', it cannot be argued that they took the idea for writing from the Mesopotamians. They are much more likely to have come up with both the idea for hieroglyphs and the reality of hieroglyphs independently.

Writing as a Creative Tool

Although writing can certainly be associated with other recording systems used in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, it can also be seen as a creative tool. This idea has been studied in some depth for Egypt, where, from the very earliest stages, hieroglyphs were linked to elite display and ideology[516]. But it is also to some extent true of Mesopotamia where this aspect of writing is rarely examined. The use of writing as a creative tool can be seen in different ways. Writing was often used in the same contexts as pictorial representations, and even incorporated into them in a way that enhanced both. However, writing was also used as a creative tool in its own right, through the composition of literature and poetry. This creative aspect needs to be given as much consideration as the links with recording systems in order to gain a better understanding of the way writing was viewed in both Egypt and Mesopotamia.

It has been argued by Denise Schmandt-Besserat that figurative sculpture had an impact on writing in Mesopotamia. She contends that inscriptions on early 3rd millennium votive statues (Fig. 5.7) were the crucial stage that enabled writing to mirror spoken language. Of the c.600 statues known, 87 are inscribed,

[516] See e.g. Baines, 1989; 1995a; 2008

although only 43 of these inscriptions can be translated[517]. There are two different types of inscription, the first gives the name of the devotee (PN) and sometimes a list of other names including patronyms, deities and temples. The second records PN, and a verb which usually expresses dedication and sometimes purpose, e.g. 'for the life of', usually followed by PN but also occasionally by the name of the ruler or another family member[518]. She argues that these inscriptions were the first written sentences to use elements such as subjects, verbs and complements[519]. They also use grammatical forms such as the accusative, nominative and genitive[520], as well as phonetics and syntax, innovations of this period[521] not seen in other contemporary documents[522].

Figure 5.7 - Early Dynastic Votive Statue Group

However, it cannot be definitively stated that it was the juxtaposition of writing specifically with figurative sculpture that changed its use. It certainly can be argued that the use of writing on statues made the ancient

[517] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 77
[518] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 79-80
[519] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 71
[520] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 80
[521] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 79
[522] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 81

Mesopotamians change the script as they wanted to write things that went beyond previous texts, which were almost exclusively administrative and lexical in character in this period. But it does not necessarily follow that this was a specific response to the statues themselves. Rather than simply focusing on the objects we must also consider their context and purpose. The statues were found in temples[523] and seem to have originally been placed there as votive offerings to the gods. As their original architectural contexts are not known it is unclear how and why these statues were installed in the temple but there are two main hypotheses: they may have been placed in the temple either to garner the favour of the gods in the future, or to give thanks for something that had happened in the past. Whatever the reason may have been the primary focus here must be a religious one not an aesthetic one, these statues were surely not placed in the temple for their beauty alone. If this were the case then there would seem to be little point in adding the inscriptions. Although these inscriptions were placed on figurative objects, I would argue that it is not the statues themselves that have inspired them, but religion. Cuneiform was not developed here to enable the Mesopotamians to fully realise their aesthetic vision, but to communicate more effectively with the gods. By having an inscription placed on the statue the commissioner can ensure that the god knows exactly who it is meant to represent, and in some cases why they have made the offering, hopefully guaranteeing the fulfilment of whatever reason the statue was originally installed there for.

The problem with Schmandt-Besserat's arguments stem from her attitude towards art and writing. She sees them as two entirely separate concepts. Art, she states in her introduction:

> "..has many definitions, none of which apply universally. In this book I label as "art" a wide range of artefacts – pottery and wall paintings, seals, stone reliefs, precious metal vessels, and statues in the round – that had a domestic, administrative, ritual, funerary, votive, or historical function in the ancient Near East. The aesthetic quality and conscious artistry shared by the objects justify the designation from our society's point of view[524]."

Her definition of art, therefore, is objects that show "an aesthetic quality" and "artistry". This is a circular argument and does not bring us much closer to a real understanding of what Schmandt-Besserat means by "art". She does not define writing and what she believes it is, but it is clear from the impetus behind the

[523] Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003: 59, 61
[524] Schmandt-Besserat, 2007:2-3

book, how writing and 'art' have affected each other, that she sees the two as very different. Rather than studying the areas in which writing and 'art' are used together and drawing conclusions from it, Schmandt-Besserat makes her conclusions clear from the start, that writing and 'art' are different but affected each other, and then proceeds to present the evidence in favour of her argument.

I would argue that her assumption that there are fundamental differences between writing and 'art' is problematic. Both convey information and serve as powerful tools of communication, so their use together can seem as if a choice has been made to present the information in two separate ways. But this is certainly a modern perception. As we shall see, in the ancient world there was much less of a separation between these two areas. If we accept that they were in fact more similar than different, then we begin to see their use together in a different light. Writing becomes a part of the scene, a way of enhancing the central message of the whole piece, rather than a way to bypass what is being represented or communicate it in a different way. When the two technologies are first used together, it is very rare for the text to be fully independent of the context and comprehensible on its own. Instead it can only be fully understood when read in the context of the depictions with which it is bound. We must recognise this and keep it in mind when we consider the impact and role of early writing.

Whilst I am sceptical about the suggested conceptual links between early writing and figurative sculpture in Mesopotamia, there is good evidence of writing being used as a creative tool in its own right, including through the composition and recording of literature and poetry. One of the earliest named authors of a poetic work in Mesopotamia is Enheduana, the daughter of king Sargon (c.2340-2284BC) and high priestess of the moon god Nanna. The composition known as the *Temple Hymns* ends with the statement:

> "The compiler of the tablets was En-ḫedu-ana. My king, something has been created that no one has created before.[525]"

Enheduana does not state outright that she composed the entire text, but instead states that she compiled it. This would have involved selecting the hymns, editing them, and copying them out. The creation of a work of art, poetry in this case, is not necessarily linked to writing, but the compiling of the poems would have

[525] ETCSL 4.80.1, lines 543-544

been impossible without it. By using writing Enheduana has created something new and clearly takes great pride in this.

This pride in the creation of written documents can be seen from the whole range of Mesopotamian manuscripts, which most commonly take the shape of clay tablets. Usually scholars focus their attentions on the contents of the text, what has been written, and give much less consideration to the material form of the text, how it has been written. This is at least partly because modern scholars usually work with hand copies of the tablet rather than with the original artefact. These copies reproduce the cuneiform as accurately as possible, but tend to pay relatively little regard to the clay tablet itself and often ignore many of the physical aspects. This gives the impression that either all clay tablets are the same, or that they simply do not matter. This approach misses one of the most fundamental aspects of these artefacts. To the person who created the tablet, the physicality of it was incredibly important and could yield extra information.

Cuneiform texts are written most commonly on clay tablets, and scribes would have learnt how to work with clay and shape tablets as part of their training[526]. However, the tablets vary markedly in size, shape, and the care and attention given to their formation. Some tablets are made with poor quality clay and/or are irregularly shaped, others are made of carefully refined clay and meticulously formed into the right shape and size, many more fall somewhere in between. The care taken usually depends on why the tablet has been created, for example school exercise tablets are often crude, as once the exercise had been completed there was no reason to preserve it[527]. On the other hand, treaties between states, for example, were documented on large and very carefully formed tablets, with care and attention lavished on the layout of the text.

The size of a tablet often depends on the length of the text with which it was to be inscribed. Some texts, such as contracts, are of a fairly regular length, and so the tablets could have been pre-made to a standard size[528]. However, other text types vary considerably in length and so the scribe would have to make a new tablet every time he created a new text. It was part of the skill of the scribe to be able to create the

[526] Taylor, 2011: 8
[527] Taylor, 2011: 11
[528] Taylor, 2011: 8

appropriate tablet for the task at hand. Attention to detail shows the pride of the scribe in his work, and demonstrate the creative possibilities in the use of cuneiform to create something aesthetically pleasing. The fact that these tablets exist in such a wide range of shapes, sizes and quality shows that they recognised the creative possibilities inherent in the tablet making process, and actively used them. To a Mesopotamian scribe each tablet was unique and created specifically for its text.

It is not only in the creation of the tablets that writers were able to use their creativity. There were also considerations about how the text was written on the tablet. On a basic level this included the layout of the text. It first had to be decided if the text was going to be written on one tablet or a series of tablets, which needed to have been considered when forming the tablet(s). Usually a scribe would endeavour to fit a text onto one tablet, but this was not always possible. Some texts were split across many tablets because of their length, for example the creation epic *Enuma Eliš* is written over seven tablets[529]. With works of literature Mesopotamian scribes also endeavoured to keep each line of a composition on its own physical line of the tablet, and to make sure it filled all of the space[530]. More generally, dividing words across lines was extremely uncommon. Therefore the scribe would have had to consider the size of the signs he was writing, and how they were spaced. As well as the text itself there were also considerations about what else needed to go on the tablet: e.g. was there a need for seals, witnesses, or a colophon? This would have to be decided beforehand and the appropriate space left. Some of these aspects, such as forming the tablet, would have been taught alongside writing. Others, such as arranging the size and spacing of signs, would have been skills that developed with practice.

Even after all of these aspects had been decided, there was still one final thing to consider. One of the most creative parts of writing a tablet was selecting which signs to use. In an alphabetic script there is only one way of correctly writing a word or sentence. This is not the case for a script that uses syllabic signs and logograms such as cuneiform, where different signs and sign groups can be selected to write the same word or idea. This selection is a choice that the writer has to make and, in addition to deciding between the various syllabic spellings, can include the use of logograms, the use of determinatives, and the use of rebus

[529] Foster, 1995: 10
[530] Taylor, 2011: 14

writings. For example, particularly when writing in Akkadian, there were a range of rebus writings based on Sumerian that could be chosen[531]. These decisions can be used to express more to the reader than just the literal written message, the different choices can carry a lot of meaning and convey extra information. It is a very important part of the creative process used to produce any document, and was certainly not an arbitrary decision.

Modern scholars tend to see cuneiform as a practical tool without much scope for creativity, unlike hieroglyphs which are much more easily linked with other creative tools such as figurative representations and decorative scenes. However, these decisions made when writing tablets shows that for almost all cuneiform documents the practice of writing was a highly creative process. This is even true for documents such as administrative texts which we would not tend to regard as creative in any system. There were always choices to be made in how the text was presented, and the tablet was shaped and sized. These were not arbitrary but carried meaning that would have been understood by the reader.

These choices in the shape, layout, and the selection of signs would have been considerations in the creation of most texts. But we do have other evidence that scribes were interested in creating aesthetically pleasing tablets, in the form of illustrated tablets. There are a wide variety of tablets which include drawings, particularly mathematical texts where examples are shown, and tablets that include maps or architectural plans[532]. However, there is one particular group of early tablets that stands out, partly because of the quality of the designs, but also because it is not immediately obvious why the drawings have been added, and what, if any, is their relevance to the text. These tablets are dated to the Early Dynastic III period (c.2,600BC) and have been found at three sites, Fara (Šuruppak), Abu Salabikh, and one example from Ebla (in modern day Syria). Some earlier engraved designs are known, but these are far less common or carefully executed[533].

From Fara two different types of designs have been found: geometric and figurative, at Abu Salabikh and

[531] Maul, 1999: 6
[532] Taylor, 2011: 18, Heisel, 1993:8-19, 51-53
[533] Mander, 1995: 18

Ebla only the geometric designs have been found[534]. These geometric designs can be split into two main categories, star-shaped cruciform designs and plait-like designs. Both types of geometric design are found at Fara and Abu Salabikh, the tablet from Ebla contains a plait-like design[535].The figurative designs include: a human holding a vessel, an ibex eating from a tree behind it (Fig. 5.8) (VAT 9128), and five knots made up of snakes. We also have a number of earlier fragments from Fara depicting animals and occasionally humans[536].

Figure 5.8 – VAT9128, Ibex Eating From a Tree

At least two of the tablets from Fara (VAT 9128 & VAT 12772) were found together in the same group of tablets[537]. They were discovered as part of an archive containing school exercise tablets and administrative records[538]. Both of these tablets have lexical lists on the obverse, with the drawings added on the reverse[539]. In fact, of the fifteen known Early Dynastic III tablets with these drawings, nine are on lexical lists, one is

534 Mander, 1995: 21
535 Mander, 1995: 22
536 Heinrich & Andrae, 1931: 64-69
537 Marzahn, 1992b: 78
538 Marzahn, 1992a: 77
539 Marzahn, 1992a&b: 77-78

a school exercise tablet, one is a fragment of a literary text, and the original written contents of another two is unclear[540]. Lexical lists and literary texts were copied as part of scribal education, and so it seems likely that most, if not all, of these tablets were created by trainee scribes.

It has been argued, by Pietro Mander, that the geometric designs may have had a cosmological meaning. Designs with some similarities are found on the reverse of two of the tablets with the professions list *Lu A* on the obverse, one from Fara (VAT 12772) (Fig. 5.9) and one from Abu Salabikh (IAS 2) (Fig. 5.10). The geometric design on the reverse shows of VAT 12772 shows a central cruciform shape separating the tablet into four areas, each of which contains another, more fluid, cruciform shape which Mander argues represent rivers. It is just possible to see that the ends of the central cruciform design are angled back on themselves, forming hooks[541]. On IAS 2 we also find a central cruciform design used to create four separate areas, the tips of the cross have hooks pointing back to the centre, and the 'rivers' are purportedly shown by the curved lines connecting each arm of the central cross[542]. Mander argues that the centre of both patterns depicts the sign 'kur'  meaning mountains, the world of the dead, or foreign lands, while the fluid cruciform shapes found on VAT 12772 resemble the pictographic version of the cuneiform sign 'a'  meaning water[543].

[540] Mander, 1995: 19-20
[541] Mander, 1995: 23
[542] Mander, 1995: 24
[543] Mander, 1995: 23

Figure 5.9 - VAT 12772, Geometric Design

Figure 5.10 – IAS 2, Geometric Design

Mander argues that this design represents the mountains in the centre, with the four corners of the world emanating from it to create four areas in which four rivers intersect. This, he argues, is connected to the Mesopotamian cosmogenic myths that explain how winds, waters and the sky form crosses, weaving themselves together in the fabric of the cosmos[544]. He argues that all of the plait-like designs could be seen in this light. He also argues that the cruciform designs may also be seen as depictions of the cosmogenic weaving of the universe when viewed in the light of one of the figurative designs. The design showing five snakes in different knots (SF 75) (Fig. 5.11) in fact shows them in a number of different cruciform shapes. This combination of the plait-like and cruciform designs, plaiting the snakes to form crosses, Mander

[544] Mander, 1995: 24

argues, shows that these designs are part of the same context, and that context is the shape of the universe [545].

Figure 5.11 – SF 75, Snakes in Knots

There are certainly some problems with Mander's arguments, not least that it is difficult to see some of the things that he recognises in the designs, particularly the cuneiform signs. He also fails to take into account most of the tablets with figurative depictions, most of which show animals, particularly some kind of cow or bull[546]. However, even if we do not agree with all his conclusions, it certainly does help us to consider the purpose of these designs. These designs are very carefully executed so it is unlikely that they were simply doodles, but must have had some kind of purpose. They are also almost all found on school tablets so are probably the work of trainee scribes. Even if it was not necessarily cosmogony that the trainee scribes were learning from these designs, as Mander suggests, it seems likely that they were part of their lessons.

It is argued that Mesopotamian trainee scribes were taught orally, with the teacher dictating the passage they were to write[547]. The tablets with drawings are almost all from a school setting so we can assume they were made by trainee scribes, however the drawings occur on a variety of tablets and are not linked to one specific text or genre, suggesting they are separate from the texts with which they are found. This is not problematic as we know that most school tablets were disposed of soon after they were made so there is no

[545] Mander, 1995: 25
[546] Heinrich& Andrae, 1031: 65-67
[547] Charpin, 2010a: 205

reason to think that one tablet could not have been used for two separate exercises. The fact that there is no written context for the designs may indicate an oral context. Perhaps the designs were created whilst the teacher was explaining something orally to the students, making the designs a kind of teaching aid, or lecture notes. This would suggest that to the ancient Mesopotamians representational designs were sometimes thought to be a better medium through which to express ideas than writing. Even in a school setting writing was not always seen as being the best system for recording and storing information, sometimes drawings were thought more appropriate. This may be linked back to the idea of writing as a recording system with specific uses. It is only during the Early Dynastic III period that the uses of writing expand from the recording of almost purely administrative and lexical information into other areas[548]. So these tablets, dating to this formative stage of cuneiform, may well reflect the idea that writing was only used in very specific contexts, and in other contexts other systems were used.

Hieroglyphs and cuneiform are both writing systems, but they are very different from one another. Thus the evidence from Egypt for writing being used as a creative tool is rather different from the evidence for cuneiform as a creative tool. One way in which hieroglyphs are used as a creative tool is by giving the signs 'life' and the ability to perform actions. An ivory cylinder from Hierakonpolis[549] (Fig. 5.12) shows the name of king Narmer (c.2900-2870BC) in its usual form, a catfish and a chisel. However, in this scene the catfish takes an active role. It is depicted with arms and holds a stick with which to smite the bound and captured enemies. As well as simply giving us the name of the king, the hieroglyphs are also showing us one of the duties of the king, that of killing enemies. A full understanding is only gained if one understands both the writing, e.g. that the fish and chisel read the name Narmer, and the image, e.g. that the king is often depicted smiting enemies. Thus it can be understood that king Narmer killed the enemies. This shows that the ancient Egyptians did not see hieroglyphs as separate to the decorative scenes with which they were often combined. Instead what we perceive as two separate parts of a message were in fact a united whole to the Egyptians, suggesting that they saw hieroglyphs as a creative tool that was no different to the other technologies they used as such.

[548] Postgate, 1992: 66
[549] Whitehouse, 2002: 439 (Ashmolean Museum: E3915)

Figure 5.12 - Ivory Cylinder From Hierakonpolis

As well as writing becoming figurative representation, we also often find scenes in which the pictorial elements are incorporated into the writing, being both pictures and a part of the written text[550]. For example in the Middle Kingdom tomb of Senbi, the Nomarch of Qis and 'Superintendent of Priests'[551], in the reign of Amenemhat I[552] (c.1939-1910BC), we find a scene (Fig. 5.13) in which the figure is offering the foreleg of an ox to the deceased Senbi. The Egyptian word for foreleg is *ḫpš*, which is spelled out by the three signs in the top right of the scene (right to left). However the word *ḫpš* can also mean 'strong arm', 'to be effective', 'scimitar' and is the name for the constellation *Ursa Major*[553]. Although it appears that all of these words are the same, this is not the case. Hieroglyphs only record the consonants, the reader is expected to fill in the vowels for the appropriate word. In order to inform the audience which reading was appropriate, the Egyptians often differentiated the meanings of words by using a determinative. Determinatives have no phonetic value, but show the category in which a word should be understood. In this instance the determinative is the foreleg which the man is carrying. The foreleg here is both a hieroglyphic sign and an integral part of the scene.

[550] Kemp, 1991: 28
[551] Blackman, 1914: 18
[552] Blackman, 1914: 8
[553] Faulkner, 1962: 189f

Figure 5.13 - Senbi With the Foreleg of an Ox

The foreleg is a normal sign within the hieroglyphic corpus and is used in the same way as all other signs. The person who designed this scene could have included the foreleg hieroglyph as well as portraying the man carrying the cut of meat. However, the incorporation of the image into the hieroglyphic inscription was an equally valid way of arranging the scene and its meaning would have been just as clear to all readers. This suggests that the ancient Egyptians did not differentiate between hieroglyphic writing and aesthetics in the same way that modern audiences tend to. The pictorial elements of a scene could be given as much weight and importance as the written elements: without one the other could not be fully understood. In the modern world we would see this as the image being given the same status as the writing, as we tend to consider writing to be more important. However, in Egypt it may have been that the writing was being given the same status as the image. Pictorial representation certainly had a longer history in Egypt, and because of its strong associations with religion and the elite may have had a higher status than writing.

As in Mesopotamia, writing was also used as a creative tool in its own right in Egypt. The earliest known literary texts from Egypt are the *Pyramid Texts*. As the name suggests, the texts are found copied onto the

walls inside pyramids. No single pyramid contains the full text, which has been reconstructed from a total of ten pyramids from the Old Kingdom (c.2543-2120BC) necropolis at Saqqara. Six of these pyramids belong to kings, and four to wives of Pepi II[554]. As this text was originally placed within pyramids, which were only built for royalty, it is clear that this was a very high status and powerful text. It is a series of magical spells and formulas that ensured the eternal life of the king in the world of the dead[555].

In the same period we also begin to find texts using continuous written language in elite tombs, in the form of autobiographical inscriptions[556]. These inscriptions can be split into two genres: the 'ideal biography' concerns the deceased's legitimate ownership of the tomb and what might befall those who violate it, whilst the 'biography of events' seeks to record special achievements and moments in the deceased's life[557]. Both of these types of autobiography are linked to the world of state administration, but in different ways. The 'ideal biography' comes from the context of legal statements and protection, the 'biography of events' comes from the context of royal decrees and letters[558], as most of these special achievements involve direct contact with the king. Despite their different forms and backgrounds they are both seeking to do the same thing, namely to ensure the deceased is able to reach the afterlife. This is either through the protection of the tomb and funerary equipment, or by showing the gods that the deceased was a good person so that he will be judged favourably and allowed safe passage.

Both the *Pyramid Texts* and the autobiographies are intended to help the deceased reach the afterlife, but they do so in very different ways. The king is given instructions on how to make his way through the dangers that faced him on the journey to the afterlife. These spells do not just enable the king to pass through and claim his place in heaven, they command that the gods allow him to do so:

> "Hail, daughter of Anubis, above the hatches of heaven,
>
> Comrade of Thoth, above the ladder's rails,

554 Allen, 2005: 1
555 Forman & Quirke, 1996: 51
556 Baines, 1999: 21
557 Reintges, 2011: 8
558 Reintges, 2011: 8

Open Unas's path, let Unas pass![559]"

This was acceptable for the king as he was divine: he was the living embodiment of Horus when alive and became Osiris upon his death. This meant that he did not necessarily have to be as respectful to the gods as mere humans did, and his place in the afterlife should have been assured. The autobiographical inscriptions were also meant to help the deceased reach the afterlife, yet instead of giving precise instructions on how to do so these inscriptions instead help the deceased to be in a better position when he is judged by the gods. For most people it was the gods who decided if they were worthy of entering heaven, so the deceased seeks to persuade them by explaining the good things he has done in his life, and ensuring the protection of his body and tomb. The deceased has to make sure he is in the best position to be judged by the gods; the king is a god so does not have to be judged, he just needs a map.

What is truly fascinating for the present study are the different compositional styles of both genres. The *Pyramid Texts* use archaic language, marked word orders and an additive style which is very different to other contemporary or later texts, in fact it is unlike any other known Egyptian literature. Chris Reintges argues that this is because the *Pyramid Texts* were composed orally, and only written down at a later stage[560]. This is also suggested by the fact that almost every spell is preceded by the word '*ḏd-mdw*' – "Recitation"[561]. The autobiographical inscriptions, however, were certainly written compositions even though they are usually framed as speeches in the first person[562]. Although it is often argued that writing is a controlled technology regulated by the central authority[563], in this case the opposite seems to be true. Anyone could have had an autobiographical inscription composed and inscribed in their tomb, as long as they could afford it, but the orally composed *Pyramid Texts* were part of a closed system of funerary practices reserved for the divine rulers.

It has been argued that many of the spells in the *Pyramid Texts* were performed or recited orally by priests

559 Lichtheim, 1975: 38-39 (Utterance 304, Unas)
560 Reintges, 2011: 6
561 Allen, 2005: 3
562 Reintges, 2011: 7
563 Baines, 2012: 30

as part of the funerary preparations[564]. If the text was not originally composed to be written in the royal tombs but to be performed at the funerals, it may explain why it is an oral composition. But if it was composed to be performed at the funeral, why was it then inscribed in the tombs? In Egypt writing was very often linked to display. The earliest extant writing was placed in tombs, almost certainly because of ritual or ideological motivations (see Chapter Two), but it also displays the wealth and power of the deceased. Inscribing the *Pyramid Texts* onto the walls of the pyramids may be a continuation of this idea. In the second half of the 3rd millennium writing was still a relatively new phenomenon that was not understood or even encountered by most people, and so having long texts inscribed in one's tomb was certainly a display of power. The fact that the king was able to do this, take what was essentially oral knowledge and have it rendered permanently in his tomb for his own private use, would have been a massive display of power, both to humans and the gods. I would argue that the power of the spells lay in their recitation at the funeral, whereas the power of the king was displayed in his ability to have them inscribed in his tomb.

The intention of the elite autobiographies is much more humble than that of the *Pyramid Texts*: it is asking to be let into the netherworld rather than demanding access. Writing here is the less important, less revered medium, that is open to everyone, as opposed to the orally performed spells that were reserved for the king. The closest that elite tombs of the Old Kingdom come to having these spells inscribed on the walls are a few scenes that depict the funeral and the moment when oral rituals were performed, such as the opening of the mouth ceremony, but they do not record any of what was actually recited[565]. The oral *Pyramid Texts* are linked to the king and religion, the written autobiographies are linked to administration, but both genres utilise writing as a way of displaying and preserving the texts. Clearly the orally composed *Pyramid Texts* have a higher status than the autobiographies because of their connections to royalty and religion, suggesting that writing was seen as less powerful than oral performance. The use of writing as a compositional tool in this period was not as important as its ability to preserve and display information. Writing is used to record and convey the good deeds done by the deceased, orality is used to command the gods to allow the king into the netherworld. This difference in the power of orality and writing is shown

[564] Lichtheim, 1975: 30
[565] Forman & Quirke, 1996: 32

elsewhere by later Egyptian literature. In *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah* (see Chapter Four), Naneferkaptah is able to remember the spells in the Book of Thoth by consuming the writing[566]. In the Egyptian creation myth, the world is created by the Creator God speaking[567]. Writing is powerful because it preserves, orality is powerful because it commands.

Conclusions

One reason why early writing is often linked to figurative and aesthetic design is the misconceptions about its origins. It has been frequently argued that writing was essentially developed out of the use of pictograms[568]. This theory states that writing began with signs and symbols that were already in use in the region, for example as pottery marks, 'tokens', or to decorate cylinder seals. Originally these symbols were not tied to any specific concept or word but instead worked as a mnemonic device, i.e. they had a specific meaning within the context in which they were created but were only understood as such by the creator and maybe a small group of other people. Beyond this they could have had a myriad of other meanings. Over time the meanings became more specific and eventually they became fixed within a standardised system[569]. They then slowly began to be used for related abstract concepts for which a pictographic representation was hard to invent, so that a picture of a foot came to mean words such as 'to go' – '*du*' in Sumerian, as well as simply 'foot'. The final stage in this development was the introduction of the phonetic values of the sign, and so the foot sign also came to represent the sound '*du*' within other words[570].

It is clear that when writing was developed in both Egypt and Mesopotamia it used at least some signs and symbols already in use in society at the time. These signs and symbols already had meanings and conventions attached to them within the sphere of art. When they were taken out of that context to be used in writing they were given new meanings. It is likely that the person or people who did this would have known the original or traditional meanings for these signs, but the decision to take them out of context and use them in another way makes it clear that for whatever reasons the original system was not thought

[566] Lichtheim, 1980: 131
[567] Meeks & Meeks, 1995: 14
[568] Gelb, 1962: 27
[569] Glassner, 2003: 49
[570] Glassner, 2003: 50

adequate. The signs used in early writing systems may have started as a part of the artistic canon, but the very act of taking them out of this context and placing them into the new one of writing expresses dissatisfaction with the original system and the desire to move beyond it, out of the world of artistic representation and into something else.

In Mesopotamia the link between writing and depictions seems to be tenuous. They are certainly used together in certain situations, but we do not see the combination of the two as we do in Egypt. In fact where we see writing used in the same contexts as representational scenes or figurative objects it is being used to convey information that cannot be given through representational devices. However, although the two areas are simply used together rather than being incorporated, the creative aspects of cuneiform still have to be taken into account. Cuneiform was a creative tool but it was also a recording device, it was thus seen as separate to other creative tools and capable of different things. If this were not the case, and cuneiform was only able to convey and store the same information as other systems, there would have been little point in inventing it.

In Egypt, there is clear evidence for close links between writing and representational scenes, and the common combination of these two elements suggests that despite their differences they were still seen as similar and thought to work well together. In terms of literature, it seems that writing was certainly used as a creative tool, but that once composed it was not thought vital that it be experienced through writing, as the norm seems to have been oral performance. Indeed, the earliest written compositions, the autobiographical tomb inscriptions, are written in the first person and presented as if the tomb owner is speaking to his audience. Although this may seem as if writing was subordinated to depictions and orality, the ease with which it was incorporated with these older means of communications suggests that writing was seen as an equal to these esteemed and long standing traditions. The hieroglyphic system was created in Egypt to fill a niche in the context of display, ideology and funerary practices, and so from its earliest existence was associated with these areas. These are all very important aspects of culture so it is unlikely that an inferior technology would have been used with them. Either hieroglyphs were being revered to be allowed into this context, or being in this context made hieroglyphs revered, something that can be seen

from the Egyptian word for hieroglyphs which translates as "words of god"[571].

Overall, I would argue that the use of writing as a creative tool had very little impact on its development in terms of its functionality in either Egypt or Mesopotamia. However, in Egypt its role as a creative tool had much more of an impact on its status, elevating it to the same level as art, a much older and highly esteemed system of communication. This would have certainly differentiated it from the other recording systems in use at the time, such as seals and pottery marks. In fact in Egypt both of these recording systems were eventually adapted to use writing: cylinder seals become covered in hieroglyphs rather than aesthetic designs, and pottery marks began to use the hieroglyphic system rather than the earlier sign system used in the Pre-Dynastic period. In Mesopotamia there was a much looser connection between writing and art, and there seems to have been much less of an effect on either system. Cuneiform is seen much more as a recording system, and it is developed when it is used as such in new contexts, for example in a religious setting. However, this does not mean that there were no creative aspects to cuneiform writing. It is clear that a lot of thought and effort was put into the creation of tablets and texts that were aesthetically pleasing as well as recording or conveying the desired information.

The writing systems of hieroglyphs and cuneiform have both parallels and differences. It is usually assumed that cuneiform was a recording system, and hieroglyphs was a creative tool, but as we have seen this is not the case. Both seem to have been seen as a recording system and a creative tool, but the ways in which they were used and interacted with these areas were different. Cuneiform clearly did have aesthetic and creative aspects, such as the care taken over the tablet, layout and sign choice. Hieroglyphs did have a role as a recording system, as can be seen from its connections to sealing, pottery marks and tags. Hieroglyphs were as much a recording system as cuneiform, and cuneiform was as much a creative tool as hieroglyphs, but as we have discussed they filled these roles in different ways.

We have also seen that in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia writing was not always thought to be the best way of expressing or recording something. From Mesopotamia we have designs incised on school tablets

[571] Forman & Quirke, 1996: 10

that record information through pictorial representation. From Egypt we find hieroglyphic signs being used as representational devices to depict information, rather than simply writing it out. In the modern world we automatically use writing in a myriad of contexts, but for the Egyptians and Mesopotamians a deliberate choice had to be made as to which recording system they felt was most appropriate in each context.

As stated above, both cuneiform and hieroglyphs were invented in a world without writing. Even if one script was in use before the other, the concept of a 'writing system', as we in the modern world understand it, cannot exist if there is only one form of writing. One must be familiar with several systems and understand the connection between them before understanding the idea of 'writing'. To the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, cuneiform and hieroglyphs would not have been the same. They were created for different reasons, worked in different ways, and were associated with different types of material culture. Although there are many similarities, the differences between the two systems mean that each script should be studied on its own merits. We must accept that 'writing' is not one concept, as it is usually seen in the modern world. Instead there are several systems, each with its own uses and interacting with other systems in different ways. The role of early writing was different for different systems and different societies.

In Section A we examined the ways in which modern scholars have viewed writing and its impact on society. All of these scholars were starting with the idea that writing is one concrete, discrete concept, and always has been. In Section B we have begun to see that this is not in fact the case. Egypt and Mesopotamia had different reasons for inventing scripts, and as we saw in Chapter Four, different explanations as to how it came about. In this chapter we have seen that once invented the practitioners used the scripts in different ways, and related them to different aspects of their societies, something that can be further seen in the different aspects of the gods of writing discussed in Chapter Three. The more we examine the scripts, the more the fundamental differences between them become apparent. These different points of view are not only obvious between ancient and modern, but are in fact apparent between different societies in the ancient world. In Section C we shall examine writing in the context of the users. Different levels of literacy existed in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the places in which writing would have been encountered by

people also differed. These different experiences must have engendered different views of writing, once again suggesting that despite the views of modern scholars discussed in Section A, ‘writing’ in the ancient world was not one homogenous concept.

Section C: Encounters With Writing

In Section B we examined the views of writing in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia from the viewpoint of each society as a whole. In this section we will consider some of the more individual responses to writing, from both literates and non-literates. The focus will be on who actually used writing, and under what circumstances people would have encountered it. In the modern world these questions would be easy to answer, as almost everyone uses writing and it is encountered almost everywhere, but this was not the case in the ancient world.

Chapter Six will look at literate responses of writing, with the different experiences of writing engendered by the different reasons for acquiring literacy and the different levels of literacy this led to. This will highlight the fact that without near universal literacy, as is found in the modern world, there is not, and cannot be, just one view of writing. Finally, in Chapter Seven we will consider the non-literate encounters with writing. This by its very nature a more challenging prospect, as of course non-literates are not represented in the written sources. By looking at the two areas in which non-literates would have most frequently encountered writing, the temple and the palace, we can understand the contexts within which this group would have understood writing, and through this their views on its role.

Chapter 6 – Practitioners of Writing, Levels of Literacy

In the modern world literacy is usually regarded as an absolute, people are either literate or not. However this is a modern concept. In antiquity there was a much wider range of literacy levels. As literate people within a literate society with a compulsory school education, we are used to the idea that everyone has the same experience of writing because everyone learns and uses it in the same way, but this was not always the case. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia the reasons for how and why people learnt to read and write, and therefore what they learnt to read and write, were less homogenous. Different levels of literacy lead people to use writing in different ways. These different interactions create very different experiences of reading and writing for people; we cannot assume that there was one single impact of writing across the entire geographical and chronological time period under consideration. If we wish to fully examine the impact of writing then it is important that we understand the experiences of different groups of users.

Education and literacy has always been used as a status symbol. As we shall see in the first section, in Egypt and Mesopotamia this was particularly true of the elite and high officials. Although these people were literate and proud of it, they seem to have used these skills only selectively. In most contexts they preferred to employ personal secretaries and scribes to read and write for them, as has been common for the elite, or those who feel themselves to be elite, ever since. This experience raises the question of whether writing itself was truly seen as important, or if it was the process of education, with the ability to read and write as its visible result, that was prized.

Others, and quite possibly most people who became literate in Egypt and Mesopotamia, did so in order to actually use the skills, but the different requirements and reasons for literacy created a range of different literacy levels. Niek Veldhuis has analysed three types of cuneiform literacy: functional, technical, and scholarly[572]. Those who were functionally literate would have been capable of reading and perhaps writing accounts and letters, but these people would have had no connection to large formal or state institutions and would not have understood the full writing system[573]. Technical literacy would have involved the

[572] Veldhuis, 2011: 70
[573] Veldhuis, 2011: 71

understanding and use of technical terms, particularly the logograms and terminology used to write texts in particular genres. People who were functionally literate would have had no need to learn these specialist terms, only those with specific reasons, usually professional scribes, would have understood and used them. For example in Mesopotamia omen compendia often use a high number of logograms and specialised readings so divination experts would have needed technical literacy[574]. Finally, scholarly literacy is defined by Veldhuis as "the knowledge of the writing system for its own sake[575]". This is the kind of literacy involves a thorough understanding of the entire writing system and its history[576]. These three types of literacy: functional, technical, and scholarly, are the terms that I will use to broadly define the literacy of the different groups we will examine in the second part of this chapter. I will study each of these levels of literacy in Egypt and Mesopotamia to examine how the way in which a person understands and uses writing can affect their views on the role of writing.

Literacy as a Status Marker

As we are trying to understand the ancient views on the role of writing within society it is important that we take into account the whole range of views held by different groups of people. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia there were groups of people who used their education as an indication of high status. These people were literate, but chose to have scribes or secretaries working for them who actually carried out any reading and writing required[577]. They displayed their literacy through their titles, and sometimes through the use of portraiture. The idea of taking years to learn to read and write only to then rarely use these skills is one that seems strange in the modern world, in which we are so bound up with writing that we cannot imagine choosing not to use our literacy. But we must remember that there was comparatively little writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia and so delegating the jobs of reading and writing to someone else would have been much easier. It may also have been that the literate jobs that needed performing, such as reading and writing letters, or keeping accounts, were themselves of quite low status and thought beneath the attentions of elite individuals. As we shall see, the type of literacy that the elite tended to associate themselves with

[574] Veldhuis, 2011: 73
[575] Veldhuis, 2011: 74
[576] Veldhuis: 2011: 74
[577] Baines, 1983: 580

differed from the work of the ordinary scribe.

As discussed in Chapter Four, we have statues from Egypt from as early as the 4th Dynasty (c.2543-2436BC) in which elite men are depicted as scribes (Fig. 6.1). This is despite the fact that we know these men would have kept a personal secretary for any reading or writing that was necessary. Having a secretary to carry out these duties was seen as an indicator of high status, just as literacy seems to have been a status symbol. This seeming contradiction, that it was important to be literate but not to actually use the skills, may originate in the education system. Elite children were educated in the palace alongside the children of the king[578]. Thus, an elite adult showing himself to be literate may not be proud of the skills he has learnt, but of the education he has received. By stressing his education he is stressing his time spent in school alongside the royal children.

Figure 6.1 - Statue of a Seated Scribe

Egypt was an autocratic state, all power and honour came from the pharaoh. Physical proximity to him was highly prized as it allowed opportunities to impress and seek favour. By using a statue to show he is

[578] Wente, 1995: 2214

educated, an elite man may be showing us his close relationship to the royal family. The literate skills that he has learnt in school are a by-product. This may also be shown by the type of literacy that is being presented. As discussed in Chapter Four, the pose of these scribal statues is not how working scribes are depicted in other artworks. They are seated in a very different position and their gaze is firmly ahead, rather than looking down at their work, suggesting an official in the act of composing rather than a normal scribe working[579]. The statues also show these men writing in hieroglyphs[580], rather than hieratic which was the script most scribes would have used. Again, it may be that it is status the person is trying to convey, rather than literacy. In any case literacy is a means to an end rather than an achievement in itself. The important message is that the person is educated.

In Mesopotamia those in high office often continued to use the seemingly humble title 'scribe' alongside their much more important and high status titles[581]. We do have evidence that at least some of these men were literate, and on certain occasions put these skills to use. For example we have personal letters written by Išme-Dagan to his brother Yasmah-Addu, the king of Mari (c.1790BC). However when an official report was required, Išme-Dagan employed a scribe to compose it for him[582]. There is also a letter from another king of Mari, Zimri-Lim (c.1775BC), to one of his generals, Yasim-El, which specifically tells Yasim-El to read the tablet himself rather than entrusting it to a scribe. This was probably because of the security risks that may have arisen from sharing the information[583]. The fact that it was expected that he would be able to do this shows that he must have been at least able to read, but the specification that he must not have his scribe read it to him tells us that this was what he would normally have done. Although it was certainly possible for at least some of these officials to read and write, the norm seems to have been to employ someone do these things for them. They are not carrying out the duties that would have constituted the working lives of the people whose only title was 'scribe' and yet they continue to use it.

As with Egypt, this suggests that literacy was seen as important, regardless of how much reading and

[579] Wente, 1995: 2213
[580] Forman & Quirke, 1996: 19
[581] Michalowski, 1991: 51
[582] Charpin, 2010b: 18
[583] Charpin, 2010b: 15

writing a person actually did, or how competent they were. Once again this links literacy with the idea of high status. This may have been because of the association the profession had with the major institutions. As with Egypt, Mesopotamian society was also based on patronage, a relationship between people of different social standing with mutual expectations, but not obligations, of favouritism[584]. Advancement was most likely to occur if those in higher positions knew an individual and thought well of him. By working in the palace or temple a scribe would have had access to the elite and opportunities to impress them, and therefore advance in their career. By calling themselves scribes the elite may be stressing their links to the people and institutions with power rather than their literacy.

There is also some evidence from Mesopotamia of members of the royal family stressing their literacy. Three kings claimed to be educated in their official inscriptions, Šulgi, king of Ur, Lipit-Eštar, king of Isin, and Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria[585]. However we know that at least some other kings were also educated, for example Ashurbanipal's father Esarhaddon founded the library that went on to bear his son's name[586]. For the purposes of this study we will briefly consider Šulgi, the earliest of these kings (c.2094-2047BC). Šulgi was particularly proud of his education and the first known Mesopotamian king to advertise it[587]. He was instrumental in creating the corpus of Sumerian literature for use in the *É-dub-ba-a*, which continued to be the basis for scribal education long after his death[588]. Amongst this corpus were several hymns dedicated to him, which tell us of his pride in his literacy and education:

> "When I was small, I was at the academy, where I learned the scribal art from the tablets of Sumer and Akkad. None of the nobles could write on clay as I could. There where people regularly went for tutelage in the scribal art, I qualified fully in subtraction, addition, reckoning and accounting.[589]"

Although the true extent and competence of Šulgi's literacy and knowledge has been questioned, it is argued that his claims must have had some basis in truth[590]. There is no reason for Šulgi to have made these

[584] Westbrook, 2005: 211
[585] Charpin, 2010b, 8
[586] Charpin, 2010b, 10
[587] Frahm, 2011: 510
[588] Frahm, 2011: 511
[589] Šulgi B, ETCSL 2.4.2.02, lines 11-20
[590] Lion, 2011: 101

claims if they were false as the majority of Mesopotamian kings seem to have been silent on the subject of their scholarly education. If it was not something that had to be mentioned then there would have been no reason to lie about it. Therefore the simple truth that Šulgi decided to mention this education prominently would suggest that he could indeed read and write, and was proud of this.

Mesopotamian royal inscriptions were designed to portray the king in the best possible light, as the epitome of the perfect king. The qualities most often focused on in these inscriptions are physical strength, justice, and general wisdom and understanding. The majority of Mesopotamian kings do not choose to highlight their scribal education. It could be argued that this was because it was not felt to be an appropriate subject for royal inscriptions, but the fact that some kings did include it would suggest otherwise. There are two main explanations for why it is so rarely mentioned. Either this kind of education was unusual amongst this group and so few could make this claim, or it was not unusual and therefore not felt to be worth stressing. Both of these situations would be very interesting. If a scribal education was the norm amongst Mesopotamian kings and very few choose to stress this in their inscriptions it may suggest that they did not see literacy as a high status or important skill, at least within the context of kingship ideology. If this was not the norm for Mesopotamian rulers it would certainly be noteworthy when compared to the fact that many members of the elite do seem to have been educated, or at least felt it important to claim they were. This could be linked back to the idea that education had high status as it was connected to a close relationship with the king and other high officials. Kings had no need to prove their power and importance and so it was unnecessary for them to stress their education.

In Egypt there is also evidence that royal children received some kind of formal education. As discussed above there seems to have been a school within the palace that taught royal and elite children. We also have evidence from the story *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah* (see Chapter Four) of literate royal children. Naneferkaptah was supposed to be a son of Ramses II (c.1279-1213BC), and his wife Ahwere was one of Ramses' daughters. The story is centred around the fact that Naneferkaptah is literate, and also implies that Ahwere is at least able to read:

"He put the book into my hand. I recited one spell from it[591]"

There are also inscriptions from the 13th dynasty king Neferhotep (c.1721-1710BC) and the 25th dynasty king Shabaka (c.722-707BC) which state that the kings read certain religious texts themselves[592]. As well as the literary evidence, there is also physical evidence. A scribal palette showing signs of use was discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun (c1334?-1324BC), suggesting that he was able to read and write[593]. Palettes belonging to two of his sisters, the princesses Meketaten and Merytaten, daughters of Akhenaten (c.1353-1336), have also been discovered, which suggests that at least some royal women were also taught how to write[594].

Despite having evidence from Egypt that royal children received an education we do not find kings boasting of their literacy as we do in Mesopotamia, in fact they remain almost entirely silent on the subject. This may suggest that literacy was not seen as a high status skill, or it may reflect the more traditional nature of Egyptian kingship. In Mesopotamia only a few kings highlight their literacy and education, and it seems to have been a personal choice to mention the subject. However, Egyptian culture and ideology emphasised the idea of homogeneity and continuation, with every king stressing their similarities to all previous kings. It was the duty of the king to maintain *ma'at*, cosmic order, and a part of this was to ensure that everything in Egypt was kept the same as it always had been. This meant that there would have been much less personal choice exercised when commissioning inscriptions. Despite the personal feelings of a king about his achievements it was unlikely that he would choose to stress his literacy in royal inscriptions if previous kings had not done so.

It seems that for elite members of Egyptian and Mesopotamian society literacy was the norm. However, it is very difficult for us to assess the level of literacy that this group achieved as we have very little evidence of them actually using these skills. For these people it was not the ability to read and write that was important, as they could afford to employ someone to do that for them, it was their education that they wanted to stress. This is exactly what kings did in their royal inscriptions: they stress their education among

591 Lichtheim, 1980: 130
592 Baines & Eyre, 1983: 78
593 Baines & Eyre, 1983: 78
594 Bryan, 1984: 18f

all the other skills which they have to legitimise their kingship. They are strong, just, handsome, wise, and all of the other things that kings are meant to be. Perhaps this is what the elite are also doing, albeit on a slightly smaller scale.

Levels of Literacy

It has long been assumed that literacy rates in Egypt and Mesopotamia were very low, and that only trained scribes would have been able to write. For Egypt in the Old Kingdom (c.2543-2120BC) literacy has been estimated at about 1% of the population[595]. This figure was calculated using approximations of the total population and number of elite men, worked out from the number of known elite tombs. It is based on the idea that only elite men with official positions would have been literate[596]. However, recent studies have questioned this idea and suggest that actually a much larger proportion of ancient populations were literate, at least at a functional level. For example in Mesopotamia analysis of evidence dating to the late third and early second millennium showed that at Ur over half the houses of a particular neighbourhood contained clay tablets. Of course this does not prove that all of the people who had written documents were able to read them[597], but it does suggest that writing was far more common within these communities than is often assumed. It has also been shown through stylistic and lexical analysis that most people read and wrote their own letters[598], again suggesting that literacy was not restricted to professional scribes. The evidence from both Egypt and Mesopotamia suggests that in fact a lot of people were at least able to read, and many could write as well[599].

One of the reasons it is often thought literacy levels were low in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia is the seeming complexity of syllabic systems like hieroglyphs and cuneiform. However, these scripts are not as complicated as they may at first seem. Ancient writing systems can appear overwhelmingly complex, but this is because we are often looking at them over the entire history of their existence. Throughout their use cuneiform, hieroglyphs, and hieratic went through various changes affecting their every aspect. Modern

595 Baines & Eyre, 1983: 67
596 Baines & Eyre, 1983: 66
597 Charpin, 2010b: 12
598 Veldhuis, 2011: 71
599 Charpin, 2010b: 13

students who wish to read texts from all periods must learn all of these variations. For the ancient students this would not have been the case, unless they were learning to acquire scholarly literacy (see below). Instead a functionally literate person would only have had to be familiar with the contemporary version of the script[600]. It would also have been a much easier task for ancient people to learn to use these scripts as usually they would have understood, and probably spoken, the languages which they were writing.

Users of an alphabetic script often assume that mixed syllabic and logographic systems are very difficult to learn because of the large number of different signs that must be memorised. Although the total number of cuneiform signs changes in different periods, there were usually about 600 signs in use at any one time[601]. In comparison most modern educated Chinese people know about 4,000 signs[602], and yet, according to the United Nations, 94% of Chinese adults are literate[603]. As well as this, many people who were functionally literate may have only known a simplified version of the system, at least in Mesopotamia. It has been calculated that Old Babylonian Akkadian could have been written with just 82 of the signs in regular use[604]. These simplified systems work by mainly using syllabic signs and very few logograms, and also by writing without 'heavy' signs, i.e. writing *mu-uš* rather than *muš* [605]. Users of these simplified systems would have been able to write anything that they wanted, but as they were only familiar with part of the script they would only have been able to read things that were written with the same system.

Functional Literacy

Functional literacy was probably the most common type of literacy in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This would have meant different things to different people. Some would have only been able to recognise some signs or words, such as the names of gods or kings, others would have been able to write letters and keep accounts. In between there would have been a wide variety of levels that would have depended on the reasons a person had to learn a script, and the opportunities they had to do so. The factor that brings all of

600 Charpin, 2010b: 19
601 Veldhuis, 2011: 69
602 Norman, 1988: 73
603 UNDP, 2011: 159
604 Charpin, 2010b: 20
605 Charpin, 2010b: 20

these different levels together is that such users would not have understood the full writing system, instead they learnt just as much of the system as they needed to.

The decision of whether to acquire a level of literacy or not is likely to have been a personal one in most cases with little or no state intervention, but certain careers or lifestyles may have encouraged it more than others. There is no way of knowing if literacy was a skill acquired by all people engaged in a particular career, or just some, again this was probably a personal choice. In order to avoid generalisations and assumptions, we shall look at two case studies in this section, one from Egypt and one from Mesopotamia. The two groups of users are both well documented and will provide us with an insight into the acquisition and use of functional literacy. This will give us a better understanding of the uses and experiences of writing amongst ancient people, helping us to further understand the impact of writing on ancient societies.

For Mesopotamia our best evidence for functional literacy does not actually come from the region itself, but from the site of Kanesh in Anatolia. Excavations at the site uncovered a colony of merchants from the city of Ashur in northern Mesopotamia attached to the city, known by the Assyrian term *kārum*[606]. The origin of this settlement has been dated to c. 2000BC, but it has been argued that it was not dominated by Assyrian merchants until a later period, c. 1900-1781BC[607]. Similar colonies have also been found at other Anatolian sites but the colony at Kanesh was the largest and oversaw the trade carried out at the other centres[608]. Two of these other trading colonies have been excavated but they produced only a small number of fragmentary clay tablets, 63 fragments from Alişar, and 72 from Boğazköy[609]. These colonies were settled by members of Assyrian merchant families in order to supervise the regional branch of the family trading business. The trade involved the transportation of textiles and tin from Ashur to Anatolia, where it was sold for silver and gold which was then returned to Ashur[610].

606 Veenhof, 1997: 338
607 Kuhrt, 1995: 90f
608 Michel, 2011: 314
609 Michel, 2011: 319
610 Kuhrt, 1995: 94

From Kanesh alone c.22,420 tablets have been excavated from different archives in the *kārum*[611]. The majority of these tablets are letters, accounts or other business documents. The people writing most of these tablets were in fact the merchants themselves[612]. We can see this from the matters that are discussed in the letters. There are many letters where fear over business matters is expressed:

> "My dear brothers and lords, check my certified tablets and reach an agreement where possible with those of my customers you see. Set terms where you are able to, so you produce my silver for me. Set aside your own needs for just one or two days and clear my outstanding loans…. My dear lords, save me while I can still be saved.[613]"

It is clear from this letter that the sender, Šalim-Aššur, was truly worried about his debts and his business. The language and the phrasing give the impression that he was begging for help. This is a direct appeal from one person to another. It seems unlikely that such emotion would be evident if this were a letter written by a scribe, to be read aloud by another. I would also argue that it is unlikely that such problems would be readily entrusted to a third party, i.e. a scribe, for fear that they may become public knowledge and threaten the business even more. Such problems are usually kept as quiet as possible in the hope that new business can still be acquired, hopefully providing the extra money that is needed.

It is also clear that many of these letters are between close family members who do not necessarily see each other very often. This means that as well as dealing with business, these letters also contain a lot of personal information. For example, a letter to the merchant Kuliya in Kanesh, from Ababaya his wife in Ashur, ends with the advice:

> "Your sister talks a lot to your father and she tries to make him forget you! Do not act highhandedly, you have nothing to fear since your father has nobody but you.[614]"

This letter tells us that for some reason Kuliya's sister was denigrating him to their father, Ali-Abum, but that Ababaya did not think it was something he needed to worry too much about. It is simply included in a letter that otherwise deals with normal business affairs. This mixture of business affairs and personal family matters is in fact quite common in these letters. There never seems to be an attempt to separate them and

611 Michel, 2011: 319
612 Charpin, 2010b: 11
613 Larsen, 2010: 251-252 (142. kt 94/k 1445, lines 7-13, 39-40)
614 Veenhof, 2010: 100 (kt 92/k 233, lines26-e.)

they jump quite easily from one subject to the other. If these letters were viewed in the context of the purely professional it would not have been appropriate to include such personal matters. The fact that they often do include this kind of information suggests that the letters were not only seen as business documents, but as communications between friends and family. It suggests that they were being written and read by the named sender and recipient, without the participation of third parties.

Although there is evidence that some of the sons of these merchants were trained in scribal schools in Ashur[615], it seems to have been common for them to be taught at home by family members. All of the merchants used a limited inventory of cuneiform rather than the full writing system, and analysis has shown that different systems were in use. Although these systems differ only very slightly they can be traced through users, and where known, their family members. This has been conclusively shown for one well documented family, that of Imdīlum, where certain idiosyncrasies of writing were passed on from generation to generation. This strongly suggests that writing was taught to children by family members[616].

For the period in which the trading colony of Kanesh was flourishing the evidence suggests that professional scribes were also being taught in private houses by private individuals, often family members[617]. It is unsurprising that these merchant children were taught at home by relatives. Both groups of children would have needed to learn a different set of skills, for example scribal students were trained in the calculations necessary for the administrative system, but these skills would have had little use for a merchant trading in metals and cloth in Anatolia. In fact the education system for most young people in Mesopotamia involved an apprentice style position where they would learn the necessary skills on the job. This was just as true for merchants and scribes as it was for professions such as carpentry or weaving for which we have examples of apprenticeship contracts[618]. But the learning experience of most young people would not have been formal enough to warrant documentation, as most would have simply learnt the trade of their father[619]. It seems that in the case of these merchant families, literacy was simply viewed as another

615 Charpin, 2010a: 60
616 Kryszat, 2008: 233
617 Veldhuis, 2004: 60
618 Cohen & Kedar, 2011: 239
619 Cohen & Kedar, 2011: 238

one of the skills required to do the job. The fact that it was taught at home along with whatever else was thought necessary shows that writing was not seen as a highly specialised skill that was only mastered by a few specialists after many long years of dedicated training. Instead it seem to have been another skill which some people needed or wanted to learn, and others did not.

What is interesting is that although these merchants and their family members were functionally literate, it does not seem to have been something they drew attention to. As we have seen it was quite common for people in higher administrative and political positions to continue to use the title 'scribe' alongside their other titles. This was not the case for the merchants, who never seem to use this title or mention their literacy. This is particularly unusual as these merchant families would have been a part of the Assyrian elite, and the use of literacy as a status marker was most prevalent amongst the elite.

There are several possible explanations for why the merchants may not have stressed their literacy. It may not have been seen as very important because of the type of literacy. Many of these people learnt to write at home from family members, in a different setting to a 'scribal school' which would have focused on different skills. It might therefore have been recognised that the literacy these men had acquired, whilst perfectly suited to their needs, was indeed only functional. This would suggest that people who used the title 'scribe' had acquired scholarly literacy, and that this difference in literacy levels was recognised at the time. It may also be that these men were never employed as scribes, or held official positions within the administration. Instead they would have had other titles and positions related to their careers as merchants. Although the use of the title 'scribe' is often seen as a way of vaunting ones literacy, it may be more complicated than that. Instead it may refer to having completed the full scribal training, or having worked as a professional scribe or state official, rather than simply marking literacy.

The most comprehensive evidence from Egypt of people with functional literacy comes from the site of Deir el-Medina. Deir el-Medina was a village created in the 18th Dynasty (c.1539-1292BC) to house the people who built and decorated the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. It was inhabited until the end of

the 20th Dynasty[620] (c.1190-1077BC). This particular village is known to have been unusual in ancient Egypt, with literacy rates thought to have been as high as 40% among the adult men of the village[621]. In a 'normal' village the majority of the population would have been involved in food production, probably on a subsistence level, which is not a lifestyle that requires or encourages literacy. In Deir el-Medina this was not the case. The village was situated in the desert about half a mile from the cultivated land of the Nile Valley and the nearest well[622]. This made it difficult to grow food in and around the village. The workers were provided with rations by the state[623] and so would not have needed to farm. Instead of dedicating their time to food production the people who lived in this village were all involved in the building and decoration of the royal tombs.

It seems that many of these jobs associated with the preparation of the royal tombs encouraged some level of literacy. As well as the scribes we know that the draughtsmen and chief workmen, along with their assistants, were literate[624]. These positions did not demand literacy, but would have been facilitated by it. Some of the other jobs may also have encouraged literacy, such as painting and stone carving. Although these jobs may not have involved reading and writing, they would have involved skills similar to those of a scribe. Egyptian art was laid out on a grid system to ensure the correct proportions[625]. This would have led artists to use skills such as measuring, and calculating areas, both skills that we know to have been taught to scribal students. The decorations involved a large number of hieroglyphic inscriptions. A painter, for example, may not have needed to read but be encouraged and helped to learn through his close interaction with the inscriptions he was copying and the scribes who drew them up. There is also evidence that ordinary workmen and a carpenter were literate[626].

So why was it that in Deir el-Medina the literacy rate was so high? The tombs of the pharaohs were covered in hieroglyphs. This writing was thought to be powerful, and in many cases magical, which is why

620 Lesko, 1994: 7
621 Janssen, 1992: 82
622 Lesko, 1994: 2
623 Lesko, 1994: 12
624 Haring, 2003: 250, Janssen, 1992: 83
625 Teeter, 1994: 15
626 Lesko, 1994: 133

it was placed in the tombs. The people building and decorating these tombs would have been surrounded by writing on a regular basis, and would have known the power which it was supposed to contain. Alongside their duties in the tombs of the pharaohs, the workmen spent their spare time preparing their own tombs[627]. Because of the skills and the wealth of the community these were often quite grand, and most include hieroglyphic passages copied from religious texts[628]. This strongly suggests that the population of Deir el-Medina did indeed understand and believe in the power of writing, specifically hieroglyphs, as they consciously decided to include it in their own funerary preparations. This exposure to writing and the esteem with which it was held, alongside the opportunities for learning afforded by interaction with a large number of other literates, seems to have encouraged more people to learn to read and write than elsewhere. This not only includes people who had a professional reason for doing so, such as draughtsmen, but also those with no professional reasons for doing so, such as carpenters.

However, despite the fact that these people were surrounded by hieroglyphs in the tombs, as it was a magical and ritual context, they in fact learnt to read and write hieratic, as was the norm in Egypt (see below). There is also nothing to suggest that they had learnt only a partial version of the system: the letters and notes seem to use the full hieratic system. Of course not all users were entirely proficient. It has been argued that this was because they had learnt to read and write as children, but not continued to use these skills as adults, leaving them able to understand simple written texts but little else[629]. This, I would argue, is certainly a form of functional literacy. Although originally their ability to read and write may have been better, as adults they in fact only knew as much as they needed to. If a higher level of literacy had been required then these people would have maintained a higher level of literacy through practice, but it seems that this was not necessary or desirable. Whilst it seems that many of the inhabitants at some point undertook at least part of the basic elementary education, only those destined for a scribal career would have continued learning the full hieratic system and any other necessary scripts and skills, acquiring more than functional literacy.

627 Bierbrier, 1982: 55
628 Bierbrier, 1982: 58
629 Janssen, 1992: 81

The experiences of the literates in Deir el-Medina was different to the experiences of most of the population of Egypt. Most ordinary Egyptians, and indeed Mesopotamians, would not have been exposed to very much writing. The most common interaction with writing for ordinary people would probably have been legal documents, particularly surrounding marriages and inheritances. But this does not mean that every couple who married had a written contract, or every person left a written will. These transactions could have just as easily been carried out orally, and for most people almost certainly were. This lack of exposure to writing would have perpetuated the low literacy levels found throughout the country. Their lifestyles did not call for writing, and the lack of exposure would have made it very unlikely that an ordinary person would have even considered learning to read and write, let alone have the opportunity to do so. Yet when we find a community in which there is a high exposure to writing, such as Deir el-Medina, many more people are literate, regardless of whether there is a professional reason for doing so. This suggests that it is not the case that ordinary people did not want to become literate, but that the opportunities, or simply the idea to do so, were just not there. In Chapter Seven we will further explore the areas in which people were exposed to writing, and how that affected its use and role in society.

Scholarly Literacy

Modern studies of ancient writing and literacy tend to concentrate on professional scribes as they are the most obviously literate group. They are also a vital group as they were the people who produced of much of the textual evidence. This is particularly important for this thesis as much of the written evidence for ancient views on writing discussed in Chapter Four comes from scribal school copies of literary texts. This means that this evidence is only available to us because scribes or scribal educators thought that it was important. It is thus vital that we understand the scribal experiences of literacy as it will help give us a key insight into the ancient views on writing.

Many studies have been carried out on the school systems and curriculums of Egypt[630] and Mesopotamia[631], so their details do not need to concern us here. What interests us for this particular study is

[630] See e.g. H. Brunner 1957, R. J. Williams 1972, G. Callaghan 1992
[631] See e.g. S. Tinney 1999, D. Charpin 2010a:17-67, E. Robson 2008

what kind of literacy was being taught to the students, and what kind of literacy the average scribe would have actually used in their professional life. Were scribes simply being taught the skills they would have needed in their careers or was there more to it than that? As we have seen in Chapter One, education is not necessarily just about what is being taught, it is also about how and where it is being taught, as this has just as much of an impact on the student. It is important that we understand both what scribal students were being taught and what skills they would have actually needed in their professional lives in order to understand the type of literacy they had, the type of literacy they needed, and why this might not have been the same.

It seems clear that in Mesopotamia scribal students were being taught scholarly literacy, i.e. a full understanding of the cuneiform system, its history and its potential[632]. One of the ways this was done was through the use of lexical lists. Lexical lists are one of the earliest type of documents that have been uncovered in Mesopotamia, alongside accounting records[633]. One of the functions of these lists was to help teach the cuneiform script to students[634]. What is particularly interesting about many of these lists is the history of their transmission: often these lists were copied and studied for centuries with little or no changes. The most striking example is that of the professions list *Lu A*. *Lu A* dates back to the late fourth millennium BC, and is one of the earliest known lexical lists. It continued to be copied by students until the early second millennium BC, despite the fact that almost all of the entries contained on the list were already outdated and unused by the early third millennium BC[635]. The text contains entries listing professions and job titles hierarchically, starting with the most important, although our poor understanding of cuneiform in this period means that the translation is not always certain[636]. The outdated titles, the archaic signs and anachronistic orthography made this list of very little practical use to a scribal student with a future in the state bureaucracy after the fourth millennium BC, and yet it was studied by scribal students for over a millennium after it became obsolete. This is certainly an indication that scribal education was imparting

[632] Veldhuis, 2011: 74
[633] Larsen, 1988: 182
[634] Nissen, 1993: 63
[635] Veldhuis, 2011: 74
[636] Veldhuis, 2011: 75

scholarly literacy to the students, the study of the writing system for its own sake[637], rather than concentrating on just the skills a professional scribe would need.

This is further shown by the stress given to the study of Sumerian by these students[638]. *Lu A* was almost certainly written in Sumerian, and Sumerian was at the heart of scribal studies until at least the end of the Old Babylonian period (c. 1600BC), the period for which we have the most evidence of scribal education in Mesopotamia. In fact most of the extant scribal exercises from the Old Babylonian period are written in Sumerian[639], despite the fact that Sumerian had probably died out as a spoken language by this time[640]. As this Old Babylonian proverb makes clear, scribes who had only studied Akkadian were thought to be inferior:

> "A scribe who does not know Sumerian, what (kind of) a scribe is he?[641]"

In the Old Babylonian period the only text type that Sumerian alone was used to write were ritual laments. Sumerian was also used for incantations, legal documents, royal inscriptions, literature, and law collections, however all of these text genres were also written in Akkadian[642]. The fact that the language was no longer spoken, and many of the texts could be and were written in Akkadian, suggests there must have been another reason why Sumerian was given such importance, and in fact continued to be used.

Veldhuis argues that the teaching of Sumerian in the Old Babylonian period was meant to encourage a "scribal identity"[643]. Regardless of historical reality, Sumerian was seen as a link to a past golden age where Babylonia was unified under one king[644]. This was a strategy first used by the kings of the Isin (c.2000-1800BC) after the end of the Ur III period, one of the first times the whole of Babylonia was under one ruler. The kings of Isin also wished to rule the entire region and tried to legitimise this rule with history. One of the ways this was done was through the use of texts such as the *Sumerian King List*, which promoted the idea that Babylonia was traditionally united under one king, with the seat of power periodically moving

[637] Veldhuis, 2011: 74
[638] Veldhuis, 2011: 82
[639] Vanstiphout, 1979: 118
[640] Woods, 2006: 93
[641] Gordon, 1959: 206, no. 2.47
[642] Veldhuis, 2012: 13
[643] Veldhuis, 2011: 83
[644] Veldhuis, 2011: 85

from one dynasty and city to another[645]. This had not in fact been the case, but the idea strengthened their right to rule. The concept of a shared history and natural unity of the region is reflected in the materials that made up the scribal 'curriculum', which was probably reformed under the kings of Isin, and continued to be used in the Old Babylonian period[646].

As well as the political ramifications, this system had other effects on the users. By studying and preserving Sumerian literature, the education system created a connection to this earlier time, using it to enhance the importance and worth of both writing and scribes and to create a 'scribal identity'[647]. By going through the process of scribal education one would learn the necessary literate skills, but would also become part of a social group; one became a scribe, not just literate. The use of education to create a scribal identity has parallels with modern studies on literacy discussed in Chapter One that suggest the perceived differences between literates and non-literates are actually between schooled and un-schooled[648]. It is not the fact that people are becoming literate, it is the way in which they are becoming literate that is important. By going through the same education system everyone ends up with a similar way of thinking and a similar way of doing things. More importantly this group also agrees that their shared experience is the best system, and so wants to instil the same ideals in other people. It also sees people who are part of a different system as inferior. This could well be one of the reasons for the use of the title 'scribe' as used by elite officials alongside their other, more important titles. Having been through the scribal education process they truly and at heart identified themselves as 'scribes', and believed that this made them different to non-scribes.

Technical Literacy

It is often thought that scribes were a fairly homogenous group that crossed the boundaries of ethnicity, language and political systems, probably as a result of using the term 'scribe' indiscriminately. Thus it is assumed that scribal education, although different in content, had the same aims regardless of the region. As we have seen above, it is clear that in Mesopotamia scribal students were acquiring scholarly literacy.

645 Veldhuis, 2004: 77
646 Veldhuis, 2004:61
647 Veldhuis, 2011: 83
648 Street, 1984: 103

However, I would argue that in Egypt this was not the case, and that they were acquiring technical literacy.

Before we look at the education and literacy of Egyptian scribes, it is important to briefly consider what Egyptian scribal students were taught. Although the earliest evidence for writing in Egypt seems to be a precursor to hieroglyphs (see Chapter Two), it is clear from the school ostraca, potsherds and stone flakes used as 'scrap paper' for school exercises, that scribal students were taught hieratic and not hieroglyphs. This is because the majority of documents in dynastic Egypt were written in hieratic, until the 26th Dynasty (c.664-525BC) when the demotic script began to replace it[649]. Hieroglyphs were reserved almost exclusively for religious texts and monumental inscriptions, so scribes would only have learnt to write it after their elementary education if the professional field they chose to go into called for it[650]. Hieroglyphs would have had little or nothing to do with the experiences of reading and writing for the majority of Egyptian literates, and yet it continues to be the Egyptian script that receives the most attention from modern scholars.

The fact that Egyptian scribal students were taught hieratic rather than hieroglyphs may suggest that they were not acquiring scholarly literacy. Hieratic was the only script that the majority of professional scribes would have ever needed to read and write, so from a professional point of view this was the practical skill to teach them. I would argue that if these students were expected to achieve scholarly literacy then they would also have been taught hieroglyphs as this would have given them a full knowledge of writing and all of its uses. Instead they were only taught the things that would have been useful to them.

However, hieratic teaching, too, involved working with antiquated forms. Hieratic was learnt by copying out passages from literary works. Many of these texts were composed in the Middle Kingdom (c. 1980-1760BC) and so were written in a language that is known today as Middle Egyptian. However, they were still being copied by students up until at least the 20th Dynasty (c. 1190-1077BC), when the students and the teachers would have spoken Late Egyptian[651]. Few people would have understood the archaic language

[649] Kuhrt, 1995: 636
[650] Wente, 1995: 2216
[651] Toivari-Viitala, 2001: 189

of these texts and what they meant. There was also very little chance that the average professional scribe would ever have had to read or compose a text in Middle Egyptian, yet they continued to be copied as a standard part of scribal training. Although this system involves some use of an archaic, outdated language, it is not the same as the Mesopotamian students learning Sumerian, as there is nothing to suggest the Egyptians students in the New Kingdom were supposed to or did understand Middle Egyptian. In fact these elementary school texts often feature serious mistakes that make the text completely unreadable, showing that the students, and possibly the teacher, did not understand what they were writing[652].

Despite these problems with the teaching of hieratic I would argue that Egyptian scribes were taught technical literacy rather than scholarly literacy. The elementary education in hieratic and numeracy was only the first stage of education and would only have lasted about four years[653]. After this the student would have embarked on an apprenticeship in the field in which they hoped to work, for example the civil administration or the military administration, training under the supervision of a fully qualified scribe[654]. The different areas would have required different skills, and the student would have only learnt what was specifically needed for his field. For example, those who did not choose a career in temple administration would not have learnt hieroglyphs. This system is much more about tailoring the training of the scribe to what they actually would have needed to know, rather than teaching them everything for the sake of it. It is a form of technical literacy, not scholarly literacy.

Conclusions

The different levels of literacy in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia show that there must have been a wide variety of views on the role of writing within society. A person who is only able to write a letter is unlikely to have viewed or understood writing in the same way as someone who is familiar with archaic written documents. It is therefore important to remember for the present study that we cannot realistically discuss just one ancient view of writing, but must consider them all. As discussed in Chapter One there are a wide range of modern views on the role of early writing systems, and it seems that this was also the case in the

652 Williams, 1972: 219
653 Callaghan, 1992: 7
654 Callaghan, 1992: 8

ancient world. Writing is not, and has never been, one homogenous system which everyone uses and views in the same way.

This is further compounded by the different scripts in use. If users of the same script can have different views, then users of different scripts must also have different views. We cannot expect Egyptians and Mesopotamians to have shared the exact same views on the role of writing. Hieroglyphs, hieratic and cuneiform all work in different ways, and were used for different things, so the understanding of writing must have been different depending on the script. The specific writing system that people learnt would have had different effects on their views. Simplified versions of cuneiform and hieroglyphs could have been used. But while we know that this did happen with cuneiform, the status of hieroglyphs and the uses to which it was put mean that this does not seem to have been the case in Egypt. Most people in Egypt in fact learnt hieratic, and although some of its users may not have been fully competent this is probably because they only undertook the basic literacy education, or simply did not use the skills enough to remain fully competent. It is unlikely to have been the result of a conscious decision to only learn a part of the system, as it seems to have been in Mesopotamia, and more a lack of opportunity to continue or apply their education. What is important for studies on early writing is to recognise what script literates are actually using, and so the focus on hieroglyphs often found in studies of Egypt should be changed to a focus on hieratic.

This concept of different levels of literacy, all of which are equally valid, is something that as users of an alphabetic system we find difficult to comprehend, and highlights one of the ways in which the ancient and modern views on the role of writing differ. By accepting these different levels of literacy we must also rid ourselves of the idea that only a few ancient people were literate. Usually the study of writing and literacy in the ancient world only looks at the experiences of professional scribes, and those with scholarly literacy. In fact a much wider range of people were able to read and write, and so ancient perceptions of writing were almost certainly different to those usually understood in the modern world.

I would argue that it was technical literacy, not scholarly literacy, that the majority of scribes would have

needed for their professional lives in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Most would have been working in administrative positions, for which scholarly literacy was not in fact ideally suited. This seems to have been recognised in Egypt but not in Mesopotamia. This is not to say that the education system in Mesopotamia did not teach the scribes anything that would have been relevant to their future careers: they would have learnt the skills of reading, writing and numeracy during their education[655]. Even Sumerian was a skill that they would have needed, but this, I would contend, is only because the scribal profession decided that they needed it. If they had wanted to, Mesopotamian scribes in the Old Babylonian period could have chosen to write everything in Akkadian, but they did not, they continued to use Sumerian. This was the traditional way and the Mesopotamian scribal education system had inculcated people with the idea that this was the way that things should be done. Even if we accept that Mesopotamian scribes did need to know Sumerian they were still using outdated documents for their training that would have had no practical use, such as the professions list *Lu A*. The question is why expend a lot of time and effort teaching people things they do not need to know?

Of course this is something that is regularly done in the modern world. Every modern state reserves the right to decide what they think all pupils should learn, and that is what they are taught regardless of whether these are skills or information that will actually be useful to the student. This brings us back to the idea of education discussed in Chapter One. When judging the worth of an education system most people, consciously or not, tend to believe that the education they have received is the best kind, and so this is what they think should be taught to other people. This is precisely why in Mesopotamia scribal students continued to be taught Sumerian and use archaic lexical lists, and why in Egypt scribal students continued to use texts in a language they did not, and probably never would, properly understand.

In Chapter Seven we will look at the places in which writing would have been encountered by all ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, regardless of their level of literacy, or indeed complete lack of it. This will again help to highlight the different views on writing in the ancient world. People who are surrounded by writing on a regular basis will see it in a different light to people who rarely, or never, encounter it. To gain

[655] Veldhuis, 2011: 84

a true understanding of the ancient views on the role of early writing systems we must consider the whole range of interactions with writing.

Chapter 7 - Exposed to Writing: Non-Literate Experiences

As discussed in Chapter Six there was a wide variety of different views of writing in the ancient world. As well as the different levels of literacy, this is also apparent in the different interactions with writing by different population groups. Some people, such as those working for the state administration, would have encountered writing on a regular basis. Other people, especially the rural population, would have had little or no contact with writing as their lifestyles would not have necessitated it. These different experiences would have led to different views of writing and the role it played in society. In this chapter we will examine these different encounters with writing to try and gain fuller picture of these views. This focus is particularly important for non-literates whose experiences of writing may otherwise be lost to us.

The evidence that we have for both Egypt and Mesopotamia is largely from urban centres rather than rural communities, as this is where the majority of archaeological work has been focused. Much of this evidence comes from large institutions which are only found in urban settlements. However, it is likely that these institutions are where the majority of writing was taking place. We know that in Egypt all professional scribes worked within the official administration[656]. There is no evidence in dynastic Egypt for 'self-employed' scribes, i.e. people working on a local level drawing up documents such as letters or contracts for private individuals as needed. It is probable that people who wanted such documents written simply went to the nearest government office and asked the official scribes to do it[657]. This would suggest that access to writing would have been limited in rural communities as it would have necessitated travelling to the nearest urban centre where the state administration was based. It is unlikely that many people would have done this except in important circumstances. Normally they would have used oral formats. As discussed in Chapter One, the continued use of oral formats even after the introduction of writing is quite common as this is the known and trusted mode of information storage and communication for communities[658].

The places where writing would have been most common, the temple and palaces, would have been largely

[656] Baines, 1983: 584
[657] Wente, 1995: 2217
[658] Clanchy, 1979: 149

closed worlds with access limited to specific groups. In this chapter I will be using the concept of the 'palace' to denote the state administration, that many people would have encountered in some way but almost certainly not in the physical context of the palace buildings. Access to the residence of the king is likely to have been severely restricted in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Instead people would have most often encountered state administration via officials travelling to their communities, in particular to calculate tax obligations. There would have been more access to the temples in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but this would almost certainly have been restricted to specific areas for the majority of people.

Temple: Encounters with the Divine

In both Egypt and Mesopotamia writing was associated with temples and the divine from its earliest stages, but this was manifested in different ways in each region. In Egypt the earliest evidence of writing comes from an elite funerary context, cemetery U at Abydos (see Chapter Two), and funerary practice is of course inextricably linked with religious practice. In Mesopotamia the earliest evidence of writing has been found in a temple, the Eanna at Uruk (see Chapter Two). Neither of these uses are likely to have afforded much possibility for experiences of writing by the general public. In Egypt early writing was connected to elite burial ceremonies, and in Mesopotamia it was used by the temple administration, neither areas to which most people would have had access. As the uses of writing became more widespread the links to the temple and the gods became more prevalent, making encounters with writing in the sphere of the temple and divine more likely, albeit in different ways in each region.

Egypt

Even to the modern visitor one of the most obvious things when approaching an ancient Egyptian temple is that it is covered inside and out with figurative scenes and hieroglyphs. In ancient times this would have been even more pronounced as the scenes and writing would have been painted in bright colours, making them stand out from the surrounding stonework. Temples would have been found in every town and city in Egypt. They would often have been the only stone building in a settlement and would have been the most prominent structures in the area. Thus even when not visiting the temple itself, the hieroglyphs adorning its facade would still have been seen by many people in the town. Hieroglyphs were only used in the context

of monumental inscriptions and religious texts, and so this would have been the only place where the majority of ancient Egyptians would have ever seen the script. This would have created a clear link between the gods and hieroglyphs.

It is unclear, however, if this would have been the case in the Early Dynastic period (c.2900-2545BC), which particularly interests us for the purposes of this study. Almost all of the surviving temple structures in Egypt date to the New Kingdom (c.1539-1292BC) or later. Aside from royal funerary temples, the only archaeological evidence for Early Dynastic temples in Egypt comes from Hierakonpolis, where the remains of a large 1st Dynasty (c.2900-2730BC) enclosure has been found, along with the remains of another enclosure possibly dating to the 2nd Dynasty[659] (c.2730-2590BC). Importantly, these enclosures had niched panelled facades[660]. I would argue that it is unlikely that hieroglyphs would have been carved or painted onto such a façade, as the decoration is inherent in the design. This would suggest that in the first few centuries after writing was invented in Egypt it would not have been visible to all via the medium of temple buildings.

The earliest known temples to be inscribed with hieroglyphs were the royal funerary chapels, the earliest extant example being that of the 6th Dynasty king Pepy I (c.2276-2228BC) at Tell Basta in Lower Egypt[661]. This is clearly a continuation of the link between hieroglyphs and elite funerary preparations, seen before this period in the inscriptions of the *Pyramid Texts* and autobiographies in tombs discussed in Chapter Five. Outside of a funerary context the earliest known temple to contain hieroglyphic inscriptions is the Middle Kingdom temple of Renenutet at Medinet Madi in the Fayum, dating to the reign of the king Amenemhat III (c.1818-1773BC). This temple displays the full range of scenes that are found on later temples[662]. It is unlikely that this corpus of scenes was created in one go as they depict some complex theological ideas. Instead it is likely to have been a gradual development over time, suggesting that some of these scenes or inscriptions may already have been found in earlier temples.

[659] Baines, 1995b: 306
[660] Baines, 1995b: 306
[661] Baines, 1995b: 307
[662] Baines, 1995b: 307

But, even if the practice of covering temple walls with hieroglyphic inscriptions did not begin until the early second millennium, it does not mean that writing would not have been encountered in temples in earlier periods. One of the colossi of Min from Coptos has several signs incised on its side (Fig. 7.1) which are similar to the signs found incised on tags in cemetery U at Abydos[663], discussed in Chapter Two. It has been argued that they prove the dating of the statues to the late Predynastic period[664]. The fact that even in this very early stage of writing in Egypt we find evidence of writing in a visible monumental temple context suggests that hieroglyphs may well have been a feature of temples from very early on, albeit on a smaller scale or in different ways than in later periods. The temple of Min at Coptos was only ever a provincial temple, and it has been argued that these colossi are evidence for the monumental scale of Egyptian temples in this early period as it would be unusual to endow such a comparatively insignificant temple with expensive stone statues and not to do so for other more prominent temples[665]. It seems that we do not have more evidence of Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom temples because most of them were built in mud brick[666] not stone, and so have not survived in the archaeological record.

Figure 7.1 - Signs Inscribed on a Colossi of Min

Why did Egyptian temples come to be covered with writing? I would argue that it was because hieroglyphs

[663] Williams, 1988: 36
[664] Williams, 1988: 37
[665] O'Connor, 1995: 329
[666] Baines, 1995b: 307

were seen by the ancient Egyptians as a way for the gods to communicate, and the temple was seen as the ideal setting for communication between the gods and humans. This is different to the writing used by humans, which was always carried out in hieratic, and later demotic. Hieroglyphs are only found in two contexts, religious texts and monumental inscriptions. Religious texts contain items such as spells, incantations and rituals. In Egypt it was believed that all such knowledge originated from the gods, specifically Thoth, who had written it down in the 'Divine Books' and passed it onto man[667], as discussed in Chapter Three. Thus all the information that these religious texts preserved was seen as a communication from the gods to the people.

There are two types of monumental inscriptions that used hieroglyphs. The first were royal inscriptions, as found inscribed on temples. The gods were the intended audience for these inscriptions but the messages were not from ordinary humans, they were from the king. In Egypt the king was a god, and as gods communicated via hieroglyphs this was how he also communicated. Royal monumental inscriptions were a communication from a god to other gods and so had to be written in hieroglyphs. The other use that hieroglyphs were put to was in funerary inscriptions in tombs and on mortuary equipment. Again, I would argue that this can be seen in the context of gods communicating with humans. Many of these inscriptions follow set formulas or reproduce precisely spells and rituals. These are a form of religious text, knowledge of which would have been thought to originate with the gods, and so their medium was hieroglyphs. As for the autobiographical inscriptions found in tombs, these were a way for the deceased to communicate. Assuming that they had lived good lives and been buried correctly the deceased were in the world of the dead, which was also the world that the gods inhabited, and in later periods it was believed that the deceased became the god Osiris upon death. Once again this diving context links these texts to hieroglyphs not hieratic.

Whenever ancient Egyptians encountered the hieroglyphic script they would have associated it with the gods. This is important because, as stated above, hieroglyphs were almost certainly the script that the majority of non-literates would have encountered. For this group the main role writing played within

[667] Bleeker, 1973: 141

society was as a way for the gods to communicate. This would have given hieroglyphs enormous prestige, as with anything associated with the divine. It will be interesting to see how this may have compared to views on hieratic, a script that was certainly not associated with the gods, but with humans.

Mesopotamia

Writing was also used in Mesopotamian temples, but in a very different way to Egypt. One way was through inscriptions used to denote the buildings as divine, differentiating them from other secular buildings. This led to writing being physically built into the temples in various ways: bricks were inscribed, foundation deposits made, inscribed pegs were driven into the foundations, and inscribed nails into the walls of the temples[668]. This made writing a fundamental part of the fabric of the temple, but these inscriptions would have been invisible to anyone viewing the completed temples.

The function of these inscriptions was to inform the gods of the divine nature of the building. They were also intended for any future generations who would renovate or rebuild the temple. We know that in later periods these inscriptions were sought out by kings in order to make sure the rebuilding of temples was carried out in the correct place[669]. This was important as temples had to be built on sacred ground[670]. Kings could have new land consecrated but this was a lengthy process, and it would have been much easier to simply build on land that was already purified. This could be done by searching for the inscriptions which would have been placed in lots of places throughout the temple[671], which should have made it possible to ascertain the original floor plan. Textual evidence shows that kings did discover such inscriptions when rebuilding or renovating temples and treated them with reverence[672].

As well as the writing built into the fabric of the temples, there would also have been inscriptions that were visible to temple visitors. For example, a letter from the scribe Yasim-Sumu to Zimri-Lim, the king of Mari

668 von Dassow, 2012: 124
669 Radner, 2005: 203-234
670 von Dassow, 2012: 127
671 von Dassow, 2012: 126
672 von Dassow: 2012: 127

(c.1775), asks his opinion on the placement of inscriptions on two cultic vessels[673]. If these inscriptions were only meant to be viewed by the gods then the placement would have been less important. The gods were omniscient so could read writing no matter where it was, hence the hidden inscriptions placed on, for example, bricks or foundation pegs. The fact that such thought was put into their placement tells us that the audience for these inscriptions included people, who would want to be able to see and read them[674].

The inscriptions placed on the Early Dynastic votive statues, discussed in Chapter Five, were also probably placed so that they were visible to humans. Apart from some of the earliest examples, these inscriptions were placed on the back of the shoulder of the figures[675]. These statues were installed so that the worshipper could be in the presence of his god for eternity, and presumably they would have wanted to be facing the cult statue. The cult statue itself would have been orientated so that it faced the door. This would mean that anyone entering the room would have seen the backs of the votive statues and therefore the inscriptions. As mentioned above, it would have made little difference to the gods where the inscriptions were placed as they could read the writing no matter where it was, thus the positioning must have been intended for a human audience.

As well as inscriptions on cultic objects, the temples would also have contained inscriptions whose main focus was on the writing. One such inscription is that of the Law Code of Hammurabi, supposedly a collection of all the laws of the state collated by Hammurabi, king of Babylon (c.1792-1750BC) in order to protect all of his subjects. Although it is still not known exactly where the stela was originally installed, the text makes it clear that it was placed somewhere that was accessible to the general public:

> "Let any wronged man who has a lawsuit, come before the statue of me, the king of justice, and let him have my inscribed stela read aloud to him, thus may he hear my precious pronouncements.[676]"

It is certain that people would have been expected to be able to go and read this text, as there is no reason for telling people to do so unless it was possible. Law codes were not a codified text genre with rules that

673 Frahm, 2011: 521
674 Charpin, 2010b: 22
675 Schmandt-Besserat, 2007: 77
676 Roth, 1997: 134

had to be followed; Hammurabi did not need to make it seem as if there was public access even if there was not. Therefore the fact that he states that this was possible means it was intended to be accessible.

This monumental inscription is trying to show that Hammurabi is a just king who cares for his subjects. Whilst the propagation of such a text would certainly help achieve this, both in the eyes of the gods and the people, there is no need to rely on a written document and the idea that people could go and read it. Instead of the rhetoric Hammurabi could have achieved this by ensuring that the legal system was fair and followed these rules. It would have been more efficient to make sure the judges knew these laws and used them rather than expecting each defendant to find out the relevant law for their situation. We know from other legal documents of the period that the laws and punishments set out in the code were only rarely followed by the courts[677]. The code was a reflection of the ideal society, not necessarily the reality. Hammurabi was using writing to propagate the idea that he was a just and divinely appointed king, regardless of whether this was factually true or not.

Some Mesopotamians may also have encountered writing through the temple administration. Early second millennium archives from the temples of Nanna and Nergal at Ur record donations of gifts to the gods. These gifts included animals, objects and even humans[678]. Presumably these records would have been made at the point of donation to ensure they were noted correctly, and so their creation would have been witnessed by the donor. This would have been a very different encounter with writing than simply seeing an inscription, as it would have been personal. It was writing in which a person, even though they would not have physically written themselves, would have taken an active role rather than a passive role.

All of the uses of writing in Mesopotamian temples discussed were ways for humans to communicate and store information. The inscriptions built into the structures were a way for humans to tell the gods and future generations that this was a sacred building. The inscriptions on cultic vessels and votive statues were to inform the audience who had provided and installed the objects, something that was always done by humans. With some exceptions, Near Eastern kings were not usually thought of as divine, so royal

[677] Kuhrt, 1995: 111
[678] Robertson, 1995: 445

inscriptions were usually created by humans. Finally, although it was on behalf of the gods, the temple administration was a way for humans to keep track of goods. This is completely different to the writing that we find in a temple context in Egypt, but I would argue that it is once again because of the script that is being used.

In both Egypt and Mesopotamia there was a script which the gods used, and a script which humans used. In Egypt this separation is very clear: humans used hieratic (and later demotic) and gods use hieroglyphs. In Mesopotamia humans used cuneiform, whereas the gods communicated by writing messages in the sky, their script being the stars and other celestial bodies[679]. It is interesting to note that in Egypt most people would have encountered writing by seeing the temple, while in Mesopotamia the most common encounter with 'writing' would have been by looking at the night sky. In both regions it is the writing of the gods, not the writing of humans, that non-literates would have encountered most often. This must have given them a different understanding of writing to literates who would have encountered the human writing systems most often, as those were the scripts that they used.

Palace: Encounters with the State

As well as encountering writing in temples, people in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia would have also encountered writing through the state administration. As mentioned above, the most common interaction with this would have been via officials charged with calculating the tax owed by individuals. This was based on the income or wealth of an individual. As the majority of people in both Egypt and Mesopotamian were farmers this would most commonly have been based on the expected harvest. This would have necessitated officials travelling to farms to calculate the size of the land and from this the expected yield. We know from extant school exercises that these kind of calculations were part of scribal training in both Egypt[680] and Mesopotamia[681].

The focus of writing in Mesopotamia was always on its state uses, not its religious uses. As discussed in

[679] Rochberg, 2004: 64
[680] Williams, 1972: 219
[681] Robson, 2008

Chapter Three, the original patron goddess of writing, Nisaba, was first and foremost a grain goddess[682]. It seems that her connection to writing came about because of this aspect. Grain was the basis for the Mesopotamian economy, and writing was originally invented in Mesopotamia to record economic transactions. Thus this early link between grain and writing is also an early link between administration and writing. This connection was not only made in the earliest stages of writing in Mesopotamia. In the *Babyloniaca*, the Hellenistic scholar Berossos tells us that writing was given to man alongside various other aspects of civilisation. These are all things that are linked to the state administration: laws, measuring boundaries, and building cities and temples[683], showing that this connection persisted in Mesopotamia almost as long as cuneiform itself did.

In Egypt the state administration was carried out in hieratic. This was not the script that would have been encountered in a religious context, and so would have created a different experience of writing. Most non-literates would probably have encountered both of these types of writing at some point in their lives. Any visit to the local urban centre, no matter how small, is likely to have resulted in at least seeing the temple, and this would have meant seeing hieroglyphs, at least from the early second millennium onwards when we can demonstrate the practice of covering temple facades in hieroglyph writing. As for the state administration, most males at least would have had to pay tax at some point, and so they would have also encountered hieratic as part of their dealings with the state administration. This would have made ancient Egyptians aware that there were different forms of writing, functioning in different ways, and used for different things, by different groups.

Although literates in Egypt would have also encountered the hieroglyphic script in religious contexts, the majority of them would have themselves written in hieratic. Thus this is the script that most of them would have immediately identified with writing. In Mesopotamia writing would have created a connection between the palace and the temple through the use of cuneiform in both contexts. This would not have been the case in Egypt, where these two areas were separated by their use of different writing systems. However, for most non-literates from both regions writing would have been inextricably linked with the idea and

[682] Black & Green, 1992: 143
[683] Eusebius, FGrH 680 F1a, Brill's New Jacoby Online Edition

reality of authority and power, of which the gods and the king were the ultimate sources.

Conclusions

One of the most crucial issues to recognise about ancient encounters with writing is that they were unlikely to have encouraged literacy. In Egypt hieroglyphs would have been seen as a way for gods to communicate, and people would have only learnt how to read and write them in order to understand and preserve these communications. This means that chance encounters with hieroglyphs would not have led people to become literate in the script, or even desire to become literate, as the writing system would not have been seen as directly relevant for their own lives. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia encounters with state writing, i.e. hieratic and cuneiform, would also not have encouraged literacy. The most common interactions with this form of writing would have been through a professional scribe carrying out a specific task, often the calculation of taxes. Again this would not have led people to want to become literate as it would have been viewed as a specialised skill that was used in a very specific context but that had little or no wider applications in everyday life. The professional scribe needed to be able to read and write in order to do his job, but it was not a skill that would have been required for most people. It would have been much the same as seeing and other skilled craftsmen, such as a smith, work, which would not have encouraged everyone to want to learn their trade as well.

In Egypt, the use of different scripts in the contexts of the temple and the palace would have led to different views on the role of writing. In the modern world we view writing as one concept, but to the ancient Egyptians it was not. Hieroglyphs and hieratic were separate and had different roles within society. In Mesopotamia there was also an understanding of different scripts, and this is even more at odds with modern views of writing. Modern scholars would not class the movement of the stars as a writing system, but for the Mesopotamians this is what it was. This shows a fundamental difference in the understanding of the concept of ‘writing’, and highlights the problems inherent in trying to use modern perceptions to understand ancient perceptions.

In light of the different views of writing initiated by encounters with different scripts we must once again

consider the long running debate between Egyptologists and Near Eastern scholars over the primacy of 'their' scripts. Not only is there very little point in this debate, as discussed in Chapter Two, but in fact it may be that the entire debate is fundamentally flawed as it is comparing very different things. To the modern mind 'writing' is one thing, which may come in various different forms but its uses and abilities are always more or less the same thing. I hope to have shown that this was not the case in the ancient world. In Chapter Six we saw that the same script could be and was used in different ways by different groups of people, depending on their reasons for gaining and using literacy. In this chapter we have seen that different scripts were seen as fundamentally different things, not all just 'writing'. Instead in both Egypt and Mesopotamia we find a script that was used for human communication, hieratic and cuneiform, and we find a script that was reserved for divine communication, hieroglyphs and celestial bodies. If we understand these differences then it becomes impossible to debate which region first invented 'writing' as there is actually no such universal concept valid for these societies. Instead of just 'writing' there is cuneiform, the movement of celestial bodies, hieratic and hieroglyphs, all of which are independent systems that would have been viewed differently by ancient people.

If we are to insist on a comparison being made then it should be made between cuneiform and hieratic, as these were used in a similar way. However, as it stands cuneiform is usually compared to hieroglyphs, as the earliest evidence of writing in Egypt is thought to be a precursor to this script rather than hieratic. For those people interested in the primacy of writing it is of course important to use the earliest evidence possible, but this fundamentally misunderstands the nature of each of these scripts, which were invented for different contexts and used in different ways.

Section C has reinforced the idea, first seen in Section B, that writing was not one discrete concept in the ancient world. There a wide range of literacy levels which would have led literates to have held different views on the role of writing as seen in Chapter Six. Alongside this, the majority of the population would have been non-literate, and the views of this groups would have been different again. There were also differences in the views between Egypt and Mesopotamia. This leads us to question whether modern views, which come from almost fully literate societies can ever be compatible with ancient views on writing.

Conclusion

If we imagine the history of writing as a story then we are living in the 'happily ever after'. Writing has been invented, adapted and spread across the world; it is used by the young and the old, for communication, information storage, knowledge transfer, entertainment, and much more. However, we know little about how and why writing began. Living in a society where writing is so pervasive makes it almost impossible to comprehend a society in which writing does not exist. We often try to understand the beginning by working backwards from the end, assuming that if writing came to be so widespread then that must have been the obvious outcome from the start. This is unlikely to have been the case, writing was originally invented for use in very specific areas, not as a general tool to be used in many ways. Instead we need to examine early writing from the perspective of those who used and encountered it, within the context of their culture rather than our own. This is the challenge faced by modern scholars attempting to understand the impact of writing on the societies which first invented it.

In Section A we looked at some of the modern views on the impact of writing. We began by examining some theories of early writing and how these have often linked it to the idea of 'civilisation'. 'Civilisation' has many definitions, but I would argue that ultimately it is a reflection of the society from which it comes. The 19th and 20th century theories on writing and 'civilisation' originate in societies in which writing was fundamental, thus writing was seen as an integral part of 'civilisation'. If we look at this idea from the ancient perspective this may not be the case. In the early stages of writing its use was not widespread, we cannot assume that it was seen as a fundamental aspect of society and therefore part of what they would have considered 'civilisation'.

I would argue that the literary evidence suggests that the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians did differentiate between their own societies and other societies. This could be taken to suggest a concept similar to our idea of 'civilisation'. In Mesopotamia we can be confident that writing was one of the things that they felt made their society different and superior. One story that particularly shows this is *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta*, where it is the invention of writing that finally wins the battle of wits for Enmerkar. This demonstrates that the Mesopotamians were aware that not every culture had writing, as it is clear that

the lord of Aratta had never seen anything like it. It also shows the power attributed to writing, as immediately upon seeing it the lord of Aratta gives up. Finally, we can see that it was one of the attributes of a pre-eminent society, as it is Uruk, the city which can write, that wins the favour of the goddess Inanna. This suggests that the Mesopotamians may have seen writing as an aspect of what we label 'civilisation'.

In Egypt the case is not so clear cut, but the belief that hieroglyphs had been passed onto man by the gods suggests it was seen as a uniquely Egyptian technology. The Egyptians thought that their society was superior to all others. This is demonstrated, for example, by the *Story of Sinuhe*, in which despite the wealth, power and family that Sinuhe has gained in the Levant he still desires to return to Egypt. Once he does it becomes clear that Egypt is considered superior in every way. In Egypt he is referred to as dirty and squalid until he is groomed and dressed in the Egyptian style, despite previously telling us that in the Levant he was dressed in expensive clothes of fine linen. After having lived most of his life in the Levant, he refers to it as a foreign land, and the people who live there – including his own family – are disparaged as "sand-farers[684]". Yet it is clear that the audience is meant to understand and sympathise with Sinuhe, who was willing to give up the lifestyle that every man strived for in order to return to Egypt. The Egyptians believed their society and culture to be superior to all others, and as hieroglyphs were seen as uniquely Egyptian it may have been that they were felt to be an important part of this. However, this does not mean that writing in general was perceived as a fundamental aspect of 'civilisation', simply that there was an awareness and pride of the things they saw as Egyptian.

Ever since the decipherment of hieroglyphs and cuneiform, the study of these scripts has been surrounded by debates over primacy, both over who deciphered the scripts and which script is the oldest. Throughout this study I have shown that this long running debate over whether the Egyptians or the Mesopotamians first invented writing is not only impossible to settle, it is of very little importance. Deciding this matter would contribute little to the study of early writing other than a feeling of satisfaction for a particular group of scholars. It is further complicated by the fact that it seeks to compare two very different things. The ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians each used two different scripts. Both had a script of the gods,

[684] Lichtheim, 1975: 233

hieroglyphs and astral bodies, and a script of humans, hieratic (later demotic) and cuneiform. The debates over which region invented writing are focused on the comparison of hieroglyphs and cuneiform, as the two earliest scripts for which we have evidence. In current thinking they are the same thing, they are both just 'writing'. But this was not the case for the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians who would have viewed them as quite distinct.

As soon as we have cuneiform texts which inform us of the roles and attributes of the Mesopotamian gods we find the idea that the gods write messages in the sky. This tells us that the Mesopotamians had been reading these messages for at least as long, if not longer, as they had been writing cuneiform. If scholars wish to compare the first writing systems of each region they should focus their attentions on hieroglyphs and astral bodies. To the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians they were much closer conceptually than hieroglyphs and cuneiform, and astral bodies may even have predated cuneiform as a writing system.

In Section B we began to look at the ancient views on the role of early writing from the perspective of society as a whole. We began by examining the gods of writing and how they changed over time. The third millennium goddesses were linked to writing itself, along with other skills that would have involved calculations or notations, such as measuring areas and interpreting the stars. The second millennium gods of writing were far more focused on bureaucracy and wisdom, aspects of a scribe's career rather than the actual skills that he was using. The 19th and 20th century views of early writing discussed in Section A seem to fit more with the later gods of writing than the earlier goddesses as they are often concerned with the uses and contexts of writing, rather than the skill itself. This is because we are so used to writing we do not see it as an exciting or revolutionary technology, we focus our attentions on the use of writing rather than the skill itself. These questions are entirely valid and should certainly be studied, but it is worth considering if we are placing them within their proper context. Are these questions that we should be asking of the third millennium or are they more relevant to the second millennium?

As well as being more relevant to the second millennium in terms of the ancient perspectives of writing, these theories are often built upon second millennium evidence, which is far more plentiful than that of the

third millennium. We have formed an idea of early writing based on the later evidence because it is easier to do so and have projected these ideas backwards to the third millennium. This is something that we need to change, we cannot assume that because something is the case in one period it is also the case in previous periods, particularly as writing in the third millennium underwent major changes in both form and use. This, I accept, is not an easy task because of the amount and type of evidence that we have for the third millennium. However, I would argue that we should review the theories and arguments that have been put forward to see for which period they are truly relevant. They need not be discarded entirely, but instead placed within their proper context.

The literature that we studied is particularly interesting because of the difference in the ideas surrounding the origins of writing. In Egypt hieroglyphs were believed to have been passed onto man by the god Thoth. Because of this the Egyptians do not seem to have discussed the origins of writing in their literature. In Mesopotamia several explanations are given for the origins of cuneiform. The difference, I would argue, is because of the types of script used in each region. As we have seen, both had a script that the gods used and a script that humans used. The important difference is that in Egypt humans were able to, and did, use the script of the gods, whereas in Mesopotamia this was not possible. The Mesopotamians were capable of reading it, but humans could not write messages using astral bodies. As the script of the gods, hieroglyphs could only have originated from the gods. But as cuneiform was the script of humans it did not have to have divine origins, and this is reflected in the literature. I argue that these different types of script found in Egypt and Mesopotamia are fundamental to the ways in which they viewed writing. This is something that seems to be lacking in recent studies on early writing, as we do not make the same distinctions that they did. Without understanding this point of view we can never truly understand the ancient perspectives of early writing.

Two crucial points came through in Chapter Five. Firstly, I argue that the use of recording systems strongly suggests that writing was not invented in Mesopotamia and passed onto Egypt, it was invented independently in both regions. We know that cylinder seals were invented in Mesopotamia to facilitate long distance trade and they later came to be used in Egypt in a similar context. When this happened the

Egyptians copied the technology exactly, only later modifying it to create a particularly Egyptian version. If they had also taken on the idea of writing from Mesopotamia then we would expect them to have been using cuneiform, at least to start with. We must remember that for both Egypt and Mesopotamia in this period there is unlikely to have been an abstract idea of 'writing'. To have an abstract concept such as 'writing' there needs to be more than one system and an understanding of how these systems are fundamentally the same. Without the concept of 'writing' the Egyptians could not have encountered cuneiform and decided to create their own writing system. They must have invented hieroglyphs to fill a need for a new kind of recording system. Early writing was used in different ways and for different things in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Cuneiform, if it was known by the Egyptians at all, must have been seen as incapable of filling this role, hence the need for hieroglyphs.

The other thing shown by Chapter Five is that even after the invention of writing it was not originally seen as the 'best' recording system that could be used in all circumstances, as it often is now. The other recording systems in use, such as seals, pottery marks, and tokens, continued to be used alongside writing, showing that they were felt to be more suitable in certain contexts. This is also shown by the drawings found on early Mesopotamian clay tablets, which suggest that some concepts or ideas were being recorded or explained through the use of geometric or figurative designs. These designs are on tablets that also hold writing so were created by people who were literate, despite this a choice was made to use images rather than writing. This is at odds with current views of writing, where it is usually seen as the best way of both recording and expressing information. We must therefore be careful not to project this idea onto ancient societies.

In the final section, we examined the ancient views of writing from the level of an individual, from the perspective of both literates and non-literates. This section emphasised the fact that there would have been a wide range of different views on the role of writing amongst the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians. This is significant because studies of writing often imply that there is only one way that it can be viewed and that it only had one specific impact on society. For example Lévi-Strauss argued that writing was a way to enslave societies, and any other affects were merely by-products of this. This is because as literates in an

almost fully literate society which uses an alphabetic script, we are all taught how to write in a similar way and all use it in a similar way, giving us much the same view of writing. This creates an atmosphere in which it is felt that writing only has one role to play.

I follow the approach that emphasises the heterogeneity of writing and the diversity of writing practices in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In both regions there was more than one writing system, used by different people for different things. Early writing was also not understood in the same way across both regions. They were invented to fulfil different roles, as shown both by the evidence for the use of early writing and the fact that they used different scripts. There was also a fundamental difference in the script of the gods in both regions. In Egypt the script of the gods was something that humans could and did also use. Religious texts and monumental inscriptions were written in hieroglyphs. In Mesopotamia the script of the gods was not something that humans could use. They could see it and interpret it, but they certainly could not write with astral bodies. Even understanding the messages was not guaranteed, we know from the letters of scholars in later periods that different interpretations could be and were given to the same celestial occurrences. These different types of writing and the ways in which they were used and understood is fundamental to our study of early writing systems. We need to examine each script separately, within its own societal context, to truly be able to understand the impact of early writing.

In this study I have shown that there are fundamental differences between the modern and ancient understanding of writing and the impact that it had on society. These differences arise from the fact that the world is now almost fully literate. This has given us certain preconceived notions about writing: what it is, how it can be used in certain ways, how useful it is in particular contexts, that it is better than other recording systems, that certain things are only possible with writing, and much more. In this study I have shown how many of these preconceptions do not fit with the ancient views of early writing. The expansion of writing from the uses for which it was invented into its use in almost every area of society was a process that took a long time, it was not clear from the start what the outcome would be. However, without realising it we unconsciously project the ideas of what writing is now when we try to evaluate what it was then. This teleological approach is the same problem that was at the heart of the now discredited theories on

the evolution of writing from pictograms to alphabets. If we are now able to recognise the problems inherent in those ideas, we must be capable of examining our other theories on early writing for the same kind of biases. This does not mean that all modern theories of early writing are flawed, but simply that we must reconsider these ideas within the right context, that of the ancient societies and people that created and used these systems, rather than our own.

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