Two Recent Books on Ancient Scripts

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THE SHAPE OF SCRIPT: HOW AND WHY WRITING SYSTEMS CHANGE, edited by *Stephen D. Houston* (School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series). Pp. xxiii + 317, figs. 54, tables 5. School for Advanced Research Press, Santa Fe 2012. $34.95. ISBN 978-1-934691-42-7 (paper).

AGENCY IN ANCIENT WRITING, edited by *Joshua Englehardt*. Pp. xviii + 299, figs. 76, tables 7. University Press of Colorado, Boulder 2012. $75. ISBN 978-1-60732-199-6 (cloth).

Both Houston's *The Shape of Script* and Englehardt's *Agency in Ancient Writing* take up early scripts, sometimes the same scripts, and try to explain their origins, development, and occasionally either their demise (e.g., Mayan) or their survival to the present day (e.g., Arabic, Latin). Houston's book is mostly presentational, giving basic information on these early scripts (including numerals) and their development over time. The reasons for change are usually ascribed to historical factors, such as the adaptation of Arabic to the various languages brought under Islam. Englehardt's book is much more theory driven: human agency creates "things," which, as "material agency," work with people in creating a total society (a reflexive process called "structuration"[1]).

This review takes Houston's book first, which consists of 10 studies of how scripts change. The preface, "The Shape of Script—Views from the Middle," defines script as reflecting "an auditory world" but notes that "in expression it is palpably a *thing*" (xviii [emphasis original]). The common topics in this book include cursivization (rapid writing), the changes that occur when a script is adapted to another language, and aesthetics.

Veldhuis contributes the first study, "Cuneiform: Changes and Developments." Archaic cuneiform (late fourth to early third millennium) was a Sumerian "administrative system and does not directly represent a spoken language" (4). By 2700 B.C.E., syllabic signs transcribed full sentences. Soon, scribes in northern Mesopotamia began writing Akkadian in cuneiform. Often, the Sumerian sign for a word was used for the Akkadian translation; for instance, the Sumerian sign *saĝ* (head) was used to write the Akkadian word for "head," *rēšu* (transcribed as "SAĜ"). In the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1900–1600), new genres in Akkadian emerged, including "new ways to increase the complexity of the system" (23; cf. Johnson and Johnson in Englehardt's *Agency in Ancient Writing*).

Baines' study, "Scripts, High Culture, and Administration in Middle Kingdom Egypt," outlines the history of Egyptian writing: invented in the late fourth millennium, it could notate full syntax within 1,000 years. There are three types of Egyptian writing: formal hieroglyphic, cursive hieratic, and, in the seventh century B.C.E., a more cursive script, demotic. Hieroglyphic was used for high culture and sacred texts at a time when only the king and the central elite were literate. Throughout its long history, Egyptian writing (scripts and literatures) changed slowly, if at all, except in the First Intermediate period, which saw new genres (e.g., biography, fiction), reformed script styles, a standardized orthography, and a standardized seal form, the scarab, that became popular throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

In the third contribution, "Paragrams, Punctuation, and System in Ancient Roman Script," Bodel outlines a history of the Latin script. The Etruscan alphabet derives from Euboic Greek, and from Etruscan almost all Italian scripts derive. After Rome had shuffled off the Etruscan monarchy at the end of the sixth century B.C.E., it "spread both the Latin language and the Roman alphabet throughout the peninsula" (70). By the end of the fifth century, Latin had deliberately and pointedly departed from Etruscan; for instance, it read left to right instead of right to left, and it took the top halves of the Etruscan fifth letter "X" for "5" (V) and

[1] Giddens 1984.

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10th letter zen—"↕"—for "50" (↑) because Etruscan had taken the lower halves for these numbers ("Λ" and "↓," respectively). Bodel ends by discussing other, odd Latin signs ("paragrams"), such as the retained five-bar "M" that abbreviated "Manius" ("M," eventually abbreviated "M'") and the S bracket that abbreviated a seventh-century C.E. list of replacement consuls, or *suffecti* (whence comes our scroll bracket [}]).

In "Stability and Change in Arabic Script," Gruendler focuses on Arabic's ability to adapt to new languages. The script is an *abjad*, mainly consonantal. Gruendler attributes its stability to "its unifying role in Islamic scripture and the shared Arabic lexicon" (92). The earliest major text is the Qur'an, compiled ca. 650 C.E. and mostly memorized since. By 700, classical Arabic (*'arabiyya*) had developed as a formal idiom "used by people with different levels of competence" (100). Supralinear signs (strokes or dots) were therefore adapted from Syriac to help readers identify short vowels, case markers, and novel consonants; handbooks and manuals were also plentiful.

In the fifth chapter, "Some Principles and Patterns of Script Change," Salomon focuses on how scripts undergo changes, often for technological reasons or to adapt to new languages. When scripts are written with pen and ink, onset and final marks typically take "the form of a short horizontal line" (124), such as the serif at the bottom of "t." Modern technology also forces change, such as the new single-stroke letterforms for computers (e.g., the "A" in the Kia logo, KIΛ). The greatest changes occur when a script is adopted for a different language. For instance, the Egyptian "house" logogram, *pr*, became the Semitic "B" for *bet* (house) (127–28).

In "Script Change in Bronze Age China," Steinke analyzes several approaches to understanding the history of Chinese writing. For Boltz, Chinese writing developed in a unidirectional fashion, developing rebus-like characters. For Qiu Xigui, graphs lost their "iconicity" because the desire to write more quickly resulted in linearization (thick strokes became thin) and streamlining (disconnected lines conjoined).[2] Aesthetics also played a role in the development of Chinese graphs. From a single tomb (433 B.C.E.) come bronze bells that carry an inscription with elegantly elongated graphs and an inked list of funerary gifts in blocky, almost grid-like graphs. The latter style anticipated the square graphs in use today.

In the seventh chapter, "The Development of Writing in Japan," Lurie explains that "Chinese characters correspond to morphemes [that] are monosyllabic and the majority of words . . . are monomorphemic, so characters often correspond to syllables and in many cases to words" (162). In literary Chinese, there is little inflection; syntax is governed by grammatical particles; and word order is like that in English (Verb-Object). Japanese is polysyllabic; verbs and adjectives are highly inflected; affixes mark the language as agglutinative; and word order is fundamentally Object-Verb. Making Chinese characters fit the Japanese language necessitated accommodation strategies, notably *kundoku* (reading by gloss) (169), which allows an oral interpretation in Japanese of a Chinese visual text. In fact, Lurie notes that "correctly literary Chinese prose and even poetry [could] be produced by people who did not speak Chinese" (171).

In "Maya Writing: Modified, Transformed," Houston presents a detailed table of five major periods in Maya writing from before 250 B.C.E. to 1600 C.E. He then focuses on variation, warning that a scholarly obsession with normalized glyphs may be "intellectually dubious and perhaps unethical" (208 n. 1). Several factors influenced variety in glyph forms, including the aestheticism of the Mayan court. Houston outlines what he calls "domains of change"—that is, where and how change is likely to occur (196–207). The earliest glyph forms (ca. 25 B.C.E.) are small: "only a small group gathered around [a stele] could make out the characters" (198). Late Classic glyphs are rounded—they could be seen by a larger number of viewers using "shifting light during the day and at night by lambent torch" (199).

In the ninth chapter, "The Shape of Script in a Colonial Context: Alphabetic and Pictorial Registers in Mixtec Texts," Monaghan focuses on *lienzos*, indigenous, scroll-like codices that survived into the Early Colonial period. These pictorial books contain heroic histories, royal genealogies, and calendrical and divinatory information. In the immediate postcontact period, there was an immense loss of indigenous population as a result of imported disease. Being able to demonstrate that one's family owned such-and-such property was crucial, and *lienzos*, which contain this information, therefore also became important documents in settling property disputes.

Chrisomalis contributes the final chapter, "Trends and Transitions in the History of Written Numerals." Numerical systems, being easy to understand, resist change. Whatever changes that do occur are probably intentional; for instance, "7" receives a bar, "7̄," to distinguish it from "1." Cursivization changed Brāhmī number signs for "2" and "3" from two and three horizontal lines stacked vertically to the ligatured "2" and

[2] Boltz 1994; Qiu Xigui 2000, 138.

"3." And "subtractive notation," a type of abbreviation, turned the Roman numerals MDCCCCLXXXXVIIII into MCMXCIX ("1,999") (242). The switch from Roman to Western numerals began with the publication of typeset books (1475–1550)—which created new readers "not bound by custom to the Roman numerals" (247)—and with coins that had little space for long dates (the first coins using Western numerals are those of "Henric 8 1526").

The second book under review, Englehardt's *Agency in Ancient Writing*, consists of 10 chapters plus a foreword, an introduction, and an epilogue. Six of the chapters were presented in 2009 at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology; four (those by Jackson, Reichel, Anderson, and Johnson and Johnson) were invited, as were the foreword and epilogue. The editor has divided the chapters into three sections: "Part I: Agency in the Formation of Early Writing and Notational Systems" (i.e., "the role of individuals in the development of scripts" [10]); "Part II: The Material Agency of Early Writing and Incipient Scripts" (how texts as objects contribute to social change); and "Part III: Agency Through Writing and Early Texts" (a combined focus on individuals and texts). Much of the book relies on anthropological and sociological theories, especially Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" and Giddens' use of "structuration."[3] Agency, in its pure form, focuses on the individual as a determinative force.

In her short foreword, Dornan sounds the main theme of the book: "by contextualizing epigraphic expressions within a matrix of larger social practice, ancient writing provides a truly unique lens through which to view the intersection of social structure, individual intentionality, and practice" (xv).

Englehardt and Nakassis contribute the introduction, "Individual Intentionality, Social Structure, and Material Agency in Early Writing and Emerging Script Technologies." They present a short definition of agency as "the capacity to make a difference through action," but they warn that "identifying individuals and their actions alone does not constitute the study of agency" (1).

In the first study, "The Mediated Image: Reflections on Semasiographic Notation in the Ancient Americas," Jackson defines semasiography as a type of nonphonetic writing indirectly reflecting speech. As examples of semasiography, she cites street signs, Andean *khipu* (knotted strings), and Oaxacan codices (see Monaghan in Houston's *The Shape of Script*). In these cases, one does not have to know a language but does have to know something about driving, about the arrangement of *khipu* strings, and about Oaxacan topography, respectively.

Reichel, at the start of his study "Bureaucratic Backlashes: Bureaucrats as Agents of Socioeconomic Change in Proto-Historic Mesopotamia," links the invention of cuneiform to Mesopotamia's "socioeconomic development" (45). In the seventh millennium, in southern Mesopotamia, containers of grain were sealed with clay impressed by cylinder seals. Removed from the containers, sealings "turned into counters" (59) representing the jars of stored grain. In the late sixth millennium, impressed sealings were applied to the doors of storage spaces that held jars representing "not *individual* but *institutional* agency" (53 [emphasis original]). A new system for quantifying the jars was therefore needed. At Uruk, hollow clay balls were filled with clay tokens representing commodities; marks on the outside represented amounts. By the mid fourth millennium, cuneiform signs mimicking the shape of these tokens became logograms for the commodities themselves.

In the third chapter, "Are Writing Systems Intelligently Designed?," Smith explores the beginnings of Chinese script. After a short introduction on structuration and the development of the brain's "visual word-form area" (79), he characterizes the earliest Chinese writing as routinized records of "pyro-osteomancy, the heat-cracking of animal bones" (ca. 13th–11th centuries B.C.E.) (87) that gave rise to standardized sign forms and script direction.

Bestock, in her study "Agency in Death: Early Egyptian Writing from Mortuary Contexts," focuses on the earliest examples of Egyptian writing from Abydos Tomb U-j (ca. 3300 B.C.E.). After first defining writing as "a way of communicating . . . across boundaries," especially those of "space and time" (95), she describes the small incised bone or ivory tags in Tomb U-j that "were labeled in an intermediate stage of collection" (104), probably after deposition in the tomb—thus, they were meant for the deceased. Bestock then points to the slits in walls that could have served as "notional doorways," allowing "the deceased to move around his tomb" (104).

The fifth study, "Reembodying Identity: Seals and Seal Impressions as Agents of Social Change on Late Prepalatial Crete," by Anderson, begins the section on the material agency of early writing. Anderson focuses on a specific class of stamp seal, the so-called Parading Lions Group (ca. 2200–1900 B.C.E.). Short dentine cylinders are engraved on the larger end with animals,

[3] Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984.

especially depictions of walking lions around the rim, and on the smaller end with S spirals. Anderson elaborates on the exotic material for Parading Lion seals (hippopotamus dentine presumably from Syria) and iconography (the lions, a Near Eastern motif). She claims "that people implicitly experienced the seals and impressions as having identities and agencies that arose from their independent, particular material existences in the lived social world" (133).

Carrasco's "Performance, Presence, and Genre in Maya Hieroglyphs" points out how Maya inscriptions relied on "oral performance to enact their communicative power" (140); such performances were necessary since audiences were largely illiterate. Carrasco cites ceramic illustrations of writing, such as Kerr Vessel K1196, which shows an old god with speech scrolls coming out of his mouth. On a stone throne at Palenque, the Orator and Scribe tablets each present a single figure speaking to the person who would have sat on the throne.

Johnson and Johnson contribute the seventh study, a detailed description of the process of writing early cuneiform (ca. 2600 B.C.E.). Some mythological texts have the divine names of Enlil and Enki written in an academic code called UD.GAL.NUN (cf. Veldhuis in *The Shape of Script*). A starlike arrangement of four strokes in a square (transcribed as "UD") signifies "divine name." This precedes the two syllables of Enlil's name (signs "EN" and "LIL_2"), which are replaced by strokes that spell "GAL" and "NUN." The authors, in their analysis of the order of wedge strokes, determine that regardless of the signs, the names were written left to upper right to lower right. They conclude that "the apparent freedom that an individual scribe had in the placement of individual signs within a cluster might be a chimera" (174).

Englehardt's own study, "Structuration of the Conjuncture: Agency in Classic Maya Iconography and Texts," introduces the section "Agency Through Writing and Early Texts." He focuses on the moment of the *entrada* (16 January 378 C.E.), when "Siyaj K'ahk' arrived at Tikal" from Teotihuacán (189), deposed the king, Tok Chak Ich'aak (who died that day), and set up a new king, Yax Nuun Ayiin. The new dynasty, however, was also "actively maintaining a connection with the old regime": the new king had a Maya name, and his wife, Chi Jo Nik, was probably Maya "for the matrilineal transfer of dynastic continuity" (199). In fact, strontium tests indicate that the new king (buried in Burial 10) was locally born. An almost identical *entrada* occurred at Copán 49 years later: "K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' 'arrived' in AD 426, overthrew the established ruler, and was installed on the throne," marrying into the old ruling family (203). And according to strontium tests, he, too, was local. Englehardt's interpretation of these two events is lively.

In the penultimate study of the book, "Inscriptions from Zhongshan: Chinese Texts and the Archaeology of Agency," Wang Haicheng focuses on a long inscription on a bronze vessel dating to 314 B.C.E. (transcription on pp. 228–30): in a preamble, King Cuo of Zhongshan (r. 323–309 B.C.E.) orders Chancellor Gu to cast the vessel from metal captured from the neighboring state of Yan and have the inscription record Cuo's deeds. The text then switches to Cuo's first-person narrative: "I am grateful for my worthy Chancellor Gu; in the neighboring state of Yan, the king abdicated in favor of his chancellor; Gu was horrified and asked permission to 'pacify' Yan; he led an army and 'destroyed all disobedience'" (214). Wang Haicheng notes the parallel between the two states, each with a king and a chancellor: "one has behaved properly toward his king and the other has not" (215). The author proposes two scenarios: "by publicly quoting Gu's denunciation of a usurping chancellor," Cuo is effectively requiring an oath of loyalty from Gu; or perhaps Gu is already the de facto ruler and is putting words in Cuo's mouth (215–16).

In the last study, "Structuration and the State in Mycenaean Greece," Nakassis examines the status of individuals named in the Pylos Linear B tablets (ca. 1200 B.C.E.). The tablets list some 4,100 people; about 800 of these are named, 88 of whom are named more than once and in different capacities. These people "were probably elites . . . because only such individuals would have had the wherewithal to manage more than one operation at the same time in more than one locale" (242). The reviewer would have felt more comfortable with this interpretation if the women named in the tablets had been similarly assessed. Instead, Nakassis limits his survey to men because "[a]s is so often the case, the data are heavily biased toward male aristocrats" (246).

Whitehouse furnishes an epilogue, "Agency and Writing," which presents concerns and suggestions about future work. For instance, about terminology she asks, "Does a term—'agent'—that can embrace named individuals at one end of the definitional spectrum and abstract nouns at the other really have any utility?" (250). Future research should include "the whole chaîne opératoire, from raw material to finished, inscribed artifact" (254). Similarly, the whole range of writing needs to be considered, from graffiti to the "sensory experience" of writing (254). The last would include most of the history of religious instruction—"all the main monotheistic religions of the world believe that God has written a book" (254–55).

As this reviewer stated at the beginning, both books treat similar themes and case studies but in different

ways. The contributions in Englehardt's book are self-consciously theorized: several pages of theoretical statements and arguments precede fairly typical archaeological case studies. Some of the theoretical arguments do seem to substitute "agents" for "people," making them reminiscent of the old feminist adage "add women and stir." Even so, some of the intellectualizations were enjoyable to ponder. At the other end of the spectrum, the texts in Houston's edited volume are easy to understand, and they presented information that was new to this reviewer—and that, too, was enjoyable.

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