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MARGINS OF WRITING, ORIGINS OF CULTURES

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The Oriental Institute, Chicago

Front Cover Illustration

A teacher holding class in a village on the Island of Argo, Sudan. January 1907.
Photograph by James Henry Breasted. Oriental Institute photograph P B924

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This book is the second in a series of annual interdisciplinary seminar volumes that testify to the progressive vision of Gil Stein, the Oriental Institute's Director. Nothing would have been possible without the optimism, competence, and overtime of Olivia Boyd, the Assistant to the Director, and the gracious work of Assistant Organizer Eliza Riffe. Steve Camp, Associate Director for Finance and Administration, planned how the seminar would actually happen and be paid for. Professors Stephen Harvey, Nicholas Kouchoukos, and Seth Richardson helped set the theoretical and philological directions at the beginning. I am deeply grateful to them all.

Seth L. Sanders
Postdoctoral Scholar

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Other abbreviations occur at the end of some individual contributions and are taken from the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, the Chicago Hittite Dictionary, and the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary.

cm	centimeter(s)
diss.	dissertation
e.g.	*exempli gratia*, for example
fig(s).	figure(s)
ha	hectare(s)
ibid.	*ibidem*, in the same place
i.e.	*id est*, that is
km	kilometer(s)
lit.	literally
m	meter(s)
n(n).	note(s)
n.d.	no date
no(s).	number(s)
p(p).	page(s)
pers. comm.	personal communication
pl(s).	plate(s)
r.	reverse
vs.	versus

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INTRODUCTION

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MARGINS OF WRITING, ORIGINS OF CULTURES

SETH L. SANDERS, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE SEMINAR

Writing and the state both first began in the ancient Near East. But what did they actually have to do with each other? Most of ancient Near Eastern philology consists of careful examination of the leavings of the state scribes; it has revealed a treasure-house of ancient culture, from haunting poetry to onion archives. But there is a significant blind spot in our perspective on the largest and oldest archive of the ancient world: the relationship between the vast body of official writing and the actual life of language as spoken, understood, and imagined by ancient Near Eastern people. The vital relationships between language and ethnicity, the connections between languages of empire and local identity, and way languages are born, live, and die in writing has remained the subject of more speculation than rigorous research. If recorded history began in the ancient Near East, we are just beginning to explore the powerful creative relationship between writing and the political identities of the Near East's cultures. This seminar was the first to bring leading philologists together with anthropologists and social theorists to explore what writing meant to politics in the ancient Near East.

The seminar was designed to encourage philologists to talk to theorists about how their material matters. It seems to have worked. The papers and responses give a vivid sense of the stakes and consequences of the oldest written texts in the twenty-first century. Collectively, the articles here provide well-documented challenges to conventional wisdom about what people actually used Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, and Hebrew for. We met over two days, on February 25–26, 2005, at the University of Chicago Oriental Institute's James Henry Breasted Auditorium. Fourteen participants attended; Piotr Michalowski, our fifteenth, was out of the country on an international research project and his contribution appears as a supplement to the second panel. The conference was well attended and large amounts of time were given over to discussion in which the audience participated vigorously. For space reasons we have not been able to include the discussion, which would have formed another book, but the contributions of Matthew Stolper, Eugene Cruz-Uribe, Lawson Younger, and Richard Beal, among many others, stand out in memory.

INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth century, the great Romantic philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried Herder evoked the image of a key to history and politics: an "archive of paradise" that would contain the first writing in the world, in the first language in the world, written by members of the first nation in the world — in a single collection of texts, we would be able to solve the riddle of human difference by reading the origins of language and identity together. Herder evoked this image as part of a heated political and theological debate about whether there was an original language of humanity and he evoked it only to dismiss it, "for every ancient nation likes to consider

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itself the firstborn and to take its territory for humanity's birthplace." Nothing like this archive would ever be found.[1]

But a strange thing happened — the nineteenth century brought a heroic period of trade, political conquest, and archaeological excavation in which European scholarship actually uncovered the oldest written texts in the world. Texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt dating to the dawn of writing and the state were uncovered. Was this the archive of paradise? Herder had imagined this archive ironically, as the philological answer to a political and theological question about priority: the oldest documents in the world should record the oldest language in the world, which should belong to the first nation in the world and therefore the most original nation, with historical priority over all the others.

In what is still the greatest overview of the archive scholars actually found, A. Leo Oppenheim began his *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* by asking what ancient Near Eastern studies have to say to modern questions and vice versa. Writing in the wake of a world war explicitly predicated on notions of nation and race, Oppenheim's answer had changed radically from Herder's: not political theology but cultural anthropology. The nineteenth-century discovery of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt was not part of a political contest but part of the West's opening itself to the rest of the world. "Eager to step out of that magic circle, the field of energy that protects, preserves, and confines every civilization," Oppenheim wrote, "European scholarship extended to embrace not only alien and exotic civilizations but, with equal inquisitiveness and eagerness, turned to the civilizations of the past, and not only to its own past." [2] With the ancient Near Eastern archive, we could not discover the first language in the world, but rather understand how a specific, historically situated people lived, manufactured glass, or interpreted dreams.

Ancient Near Eastern studies imitated anthropology in breaking through the barriers of European culture by studying someone else's. It was like anthropology, except all the natives were dead and all they left were texts and ruins. So the field was to be a kind of deciphering and reading. Its distinct qualities came from the extreme remoteness of its subject in space and time, its intellectual promise and methodological problem united in the fact that it is not someone else's *present* culture but someone else's *dead past*.

The problem is that this archive of paradise did not belong to Adam or Moses; it was not only somebody else's past, it was a past *nobody had remembered*. The major exception to this forgotten quality of the ancient Near East is of course ancient Israel, but it is definitely an exception that proves the rule. Because modern Europe had such a great stake in biblical Israel, and the connections between Babel and the Bible exercised such strong influences, both inspiring and distorting, major twentieth century scholars of the ancient Near East were justifiably wary of these connections. Already in 1926 the great Assyriologist Benno Landsberger put forth a program for understanding Mesopotamian culture strictly on its own terms, through the inherent linguistic structures recoverable from Sumerian and Akkadian texts, rather than through historical connections and influences. What is most distinctive about ancient Near Eastern culture is its *deadness*, the fact that cuneiform and Egyptian writing was decisively cut off from the rest of history in late antiquity.

In attempting to transform this deadness into a dialogue, Oppenheim spoke of Near Eastern studies' future in "the understanding and sustained co-operation of scholars in … the social sciences, above all, in cultural anthropology." [3] But with some important exceptions, including some

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[1] For the context of Herder's irony, see Olender 2002.

[2] Oppenheim 1977: 8–9.

[3] Oppenheim 1977: 29–30.

major work by the Oriental Institute's own scholars, this dialogue with cultural anthropology never happened in any organized or sustained way.

It may be that the real loser in this has been the social sciences, as Sheldon Pollock and John Kelly have recently argued in different ways from the sides of both South Asian studies and anthropology; the problem with much social thought is that it is cut off and stranded in the present. If people reflect today on the vertigo caused by the promise and threat of globalization, a kind of economic and political cosmopolitanism, they fail to see that globalization is not modern: there have been cosmopolitan periods in the past, when people used universal languages to participate in vast communities across wide reaches of space. People of dozens or hundreds of different localities and dialects did their politics in Latin or their literature in Sanskrit.[4]

These ancient cosmopolitan worlds were succeeded by smaller, vernacular worlds. After the turn of the first millennium, people in both Europe and South Asia began turning away from the universal and started writing down French and German, Hindi and Tamil, rejecting this borderless world to live in bordered local worlds, writing vernacular languages that were not necessarily comprehensible outside their regions. In other words, as Pollock argues, the world of local cultures that we now imagine to be ending was one that itself grew out of earlier cosmopolitan cultures. Yet, social science has shown generally little ability to conceptualize this, part of what has been called its "retreat into the present." The terrible irony here is that, if social science is obsessed with the modern, it is then almost completely ignoring what makes it modern: the fact that something — God knows what — must have come before the modern in order to make it modern, something to be different from, a black box into which Latin, Sanskrit, and Babylonian, thousands of years, people, and miles are folded together and dumped.

How did we get from the archive of paradise to the trash can of history? In thinking about this disconnect between a social science isolated on the little island of the present and the vast archive of the premodern past, John Kelly points to some of the best recent studies of language and power as symptomatic: most of this work has been specifically focused on modern technology and politics. The most influential and creative studies, such as those of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the historian Max Weber, and the political scientist Benedict Anderson, have all concerned themselves with the interplay of printing and the nation-state.[5]

But if everyone agrees that everything interesting happens in the modern period, then by definition modernity becomes very difficult to understand because it does not really come from anywhere and there is nothing to compare it to historically. Kelly talks about how we painted ourselves into this odd corner using the example of Max Weber, a relentlessly historical thinker who saw modernity as a side effect rather than the end of history. The stories Weber told of writing and the state were ones in which modern German bureaucracy could not be understood without considering the configurations of Egypt or Rome. But as Weber was edited and interpreted for readers — note that almost no modern translations of Weber present his texts as he wrote them — Cold War scholars like Talcott Parsons reconfigured him as a high priest of modernity, treating the rational, bureaucratized nation state as the goal of progress rather than an unintended consequence.[6] With modernity as the only interesting question, social science loses the ability to explain it. The cost of the disconnect is the value of history and theory for each other. Kelly jokingly suggested to me one title that might sum up the problem of social theory for the study of pre-modern societies is "Why is this stuff so useless?"

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[4] Pollock 2002 and Kelly, this volume.
[5] Bourdieu 1991; E. Weber 1976; and Anderson 1991.

[6] On the reception of Weber, see Mommsen 1989, especially pp. 181–82.

Today we have a chance to retell this story so that it does not conclude in a dead end. In the rest of my introduction I sketch out some of the stakes I see for a dialogue between Near Eastern studies and social science around the politics of writing. I begin from one end by introducing the papers the first and second panels of papers; Sheldon Pollock and Peter Machinist will work from the other end, each discussing the consequences of the papers from the third panel according to their own viewpoints.

What did the archive of paradise actually turn out to be? The body of written material from the ancient Near East is the single largest and most diverse resource for the study of the remote past; beginning from the early writing of Uruk it has a longer history than that of what we call Western Civilization, if we begin that with fifth-century B.C. Greece. The Near Eastern corpus dwarfs that of Greece and Rome and represents the early history of writing from the perspective of dozens of different languages and hundreds of different human groups, from political units we find easy to recognize — the city-states of the Late Bronze Age — to states whose political theory is only now being understood, such as the nomadic, kinship-based social and military apparatus of the Amorites that repeatedly took over the Mesopotamian state and wore its writing and termi-nology like a mask in the Old Babylonian period (Fleming 2004). What the papers begin with is the very political fact of writing as a form of action: why did people bother to write down certain languages, in certain ways — what were the stakes for them and for us?

Writing is the most important technology for culture — obviously, we would not have the classics or newspapers without it. But it is also arguably the most important technology for power — you can conquer people with swords or guns, but you cannot collect taxes without bureaucratic records and it is hard for people to remember you unless you have a written literature.

In fact, as John Kelly argues in the first paper, it is possible that the story of the state might best be written as a struggle over the power to communicate, as much as over the power to coerce or to gain wealth. It was Max Weber who defined the state as a monopoly of legitimate violence, something we can perhaps recognize today in Iraq, where the main tool that the insurgents use to undermine its integrity as a state is their access to violence. It is strangely easy to forget that re-gime change itself is, above all, a military operation. As was typical of him, Weber began boldly, calling this monopoly of violence the essence of the modern state as a way to begin exploring the question more broadly. In a workshop where I put forth this definition as a beginning point, a classicist announced with apparent satisfaction that he had discovered why Weber's work did not apply to ancient states — as a philologist, he had noticed the word "modern" in Weber's defini-tion on the handout, whereupon he left the room. Why is this stuff so useless, indeed? More to the point, what kind of stories can we tell about ancient states that help us understand modern states and vice versa?

Kelly goes on to argue, in a distinctly Weberian mode, that if we see the monopoly of legiti-mate violence as one tendency constitutive of state power, we need to juxtapose it with an equally important one, the monopoly of communication. It is here, Kelly argues, that we can begin to see a common thread in some very diverse political histories.

This is because Weber's definition depends on the state giving an account of itself: to think of the state as monopoly on *legitimate* force begs the question of what "legitimate" might mean — of how the state expresses and renders legitimate its actions. Whether the Iraqi insurgents are are classified as terrorist butchers or freedom fighters depends not just on whom they kill but on what is said and written about the killings. How can the state represent itself and its actions so people do not mistake its use of force for violence?

Kelly goes on to ask, "Should a reasonable definition of the state also involve the emergence and use of means of communication, semiotic technologies?" Certain starkly contrasting patterns

in state formation might make more sense from this point of view. In South Asian history the fact that Sanskrit literature, including the first extensive grammatical and scholastic works in the west, was created largely outside of writing and the "religious" authority systems of the Brahmin caste and the Buddhist monastery were based in religious study and ritual and only loosely connected to means of coercion and destruction. Contrast China, why did it "centralize" so early, with such stability, in comparison with South Asia — does it have anything to do with China's development of state archives? In India, texts and writing systems spread far outside the boundary of any one state across South, Southeast, and Central Asia, while Chinese officialdom imposed a death penalty for unofficial calendar making.

Kelly argues that the question of semiotic technologies (who controls and distributes knowledge and information, how?) might give us new insights into the history of how states and their others form and change, a history of monopoly of means of destruction with and without means of communication and vice versa, and the historical trajectories of means of communication with and without means of coercion.

These questions inspired me to look again at the epigraphic corpus from ancient Israel. This is a good time to do this since a series of fresh studies of the whole body of paleography and grammar of epigraphic Hebrew have appeared. What is remarkable is the level of agreement between these studies; from the eighth through the early sixth century B.C., for the first and only time in ancient history, written Hebrew constitutes a unity paleographically, orthographically, and grammatically.[7]

The focus is on two remarkable facts arising from the epigraphic materials: (1) uniquely in Iron Age I, the period prior to the rise of the state, most alphabetic texts in the Levant are inscribed on weapons; and (2) during Iron Age IIA, the period when a united state is traditionally presupposed, the few known inscriptions are in a Phoenician script,[8] none bearing distinctively Hebrew paleography or dialect features. By the ninth century, any unified state that might have existed has split. It is only in this period (Iron IIB), when two states exist, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, that we begin to find a unified Hebrew writing, with shared standard paleography, orthography, and numeral system in both.

If the Iron Age Israelite epigraphy forms a history of the means of communication, how does that match the history of the Iron Age state? It appears that the boundaries of Israelite writing, from the beginning, never mapped onto the boundaries of any Israelite state. Yet someone put in a great deal of work to make sure that Hebrew texts were the same as each other and different from their neighbors. What the epigraphic texts unequivocally attest is a standardized national language. And this raised a question for me: was there a national literature without a state in ancient Israel?

The result would be a major irony, startling but well documented. After multiple attempts to monopolize both communication and coercion, the result seems to be that Israelite scribes had a monopoly on communication in Hebrew while the state had no monopoly on coercion. This dimension of biblical literature has in modern times always stood under the sign of lateness and artifice: the Jews are a nation without a state, the Torah represents the laws of a kingdom without a territory. This lateness has been connected to a fundamental inauthenticity, or a paradoxical and ironic authenticity; the state is only imagined in retrospect and Israel is a creature of ritual

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[7] All the necessary data are gathered and analyzed in Renz 1997. On the political contexts of early alphabetic writing, see Sanders 2004 with bibliography. The most sophisticated study of the relationship between writing and the composition of biblical history is Na'aman 2002.

[8] The newly discovered Tel Zayit abecedary, announced when this volume was in press, dates from the tenth century and displays letterforms with both Phoenician and Hebrew features. When fully published it will thus probably nuance but not overturn this conclusion.

and collective memory. The epigraphy suggests that it may be exactly the other way around. It is precisely in the Iron Age, when the people of Israel and Judah were separately autonomous in their land, that a national literature may have also created a kind of national identity and politics without a state. It is possible that the entire history of Israelite literature, as well as the history of Israelite material culture, could look different in this light.

William Schniedewind pioneered this approach, asking what would happen if you took seriously the material and cultural practices by which the Bible became a book.[9] In his paper, he addresses a turning point in this history, the point in the sixth century at which written Hebrew disappears, to be completely replaced by Aramaic for 300 years. What kind of subterranean life did Hebrew lead, as the scribal institutions and economic circumstances that supported its standardization were disrupted by the Babylonian and Persian conquests and how and why was it resurrected? This question provokes us to see written Hebrew as an artifact that was created and recreated multiple times. This is not to say that it is inauthentic, in some scandalous way, but that the very act of delimiting its boundaries was, and is, a deliberate and pointed creative act. Is it, for example, to be understood as continuous with Rabbinic Hebrew in a significant way? If so then the "biblical Hebrew" that we teach our students should be understood as largely a construct of Christian theologians, in collaboration with medieval Hebrew grammarians.

Furthermore, since the history of the Jews is often told as a history of a nation without sovereignty, longing for a lost state, how would it change that history if this nation's first known written remains already attested to a kind of politics that reached around the boundaries of a state, unified through their recognition of themselves as a people? Could we use this to write a history of alternatives to the state, alternatives that may be as complex but sometimes more durable? Today people not only read and pray in Hebrew and Sanskrit but in different ways have even used them in turn to reconstitute the state with a series of attendant wonders and horrors.

Kelly provides another angle that opens the following two papers. This is that the early history of writing suggests that writing is originally something that *encounters* language from the outside, rather than flowing directly out of language. Gonzalo Rubio makes a stunningly erudite case for this phenomenon as not being merely historically early, some mysterious point of origins lost in the sands of time, but as an essential possibility of writing and not only in the ancient Near East. In cases ranging from medieval Japan through Sumer, Ebla, and ancient Iran, he shows that alloglottography — writing down a text in a completely different language than the one in which it was composed and read — was a widespread scribal practice.

What are the consequences of writing not being originally intended to express words and thereby not bonded to a specific form of language? For one thing, it suggests that the "archive of paradise," the archaic early phenomena we see at the dawn of writing, might really help us understand much later and more widespread phenomena. If Mesopotamian "writing began as a system of demarcating things, with property and its accounting (and not, therefore, with language and its representation)," the history of writing might be written by examining the sometimes radically different relationships between language and writing that different institutions created. Rubio argues that increasing the distance between writing and other forms of language through alloglottography was actually a goal for a series of state scribal institutions across time — and Kelly proposes that much of the power of written language may arise in the way it is alienated from speech.

What, then, of writing when state institutions are dissolved in empires and markets? Here Jacco Dieleman's study of the Demotic Magical Papyri, a corpus of texts from late antiquity,

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[9] Schniedewind 2004.

makes a fascinating point. While these papyri were discovered together with the famous Greek Magical Papyri, which the great classicist Arthur Darby Nock (1972/1:177) once described as reading like "the actual working copies of practical magicians," the papyri in Demotic show a totally different relationship to writing and tradition. While the Greek papyri were written in the lingua franca of the day, the Demotic Magical Papyri show the largest number of different scripts of any text in the history of Egyptian writing — seven, by Dieleman's count. Why is it that it is precisely when Egyptian temple and scribal institutions are decoupled from state support that the former curators of these institutions multiply their writing systems? Dieleman argues that the abundant overproduction of scripts was actually a deliberate strategy to decrease the number of potential readers. Egyptian writing is controlled and turned into a rare and valuable commodity, owned only by the priests, as the Egyptian ciphers prevent the average Greek reader from reading key parts of the spells. This can be tied together with the content of the rituals, which as Jonathan Z. Smith (1995) noted years ago was heavily concerned with writing and miniaturization. As the sacrificial victims are shrunk down to the size of tiny animals that can be easily transported to the marketplace, the spells themselves require an increasing amount of modeling and one of the most important ritual acts becomes writing itself. The spells are thus a sort of meta-writing, a rhetoric with which ancient Egyptian tradition argues for a new role for itself in a world where everything is open to negotiation.

If the first panel's papers revolve around the role of institutions in connecting writing and language, then the papers of the second panel investigate the different publics that those institutions can address and create through writing. Schniedewind addresses the complex politics of identity in Hebrew — if Hebrew writing created a national literature without a state, how and why did it give way to Aramaic and what mechanism is responsible for its resurrection and subsequent long life? Annick Payne investigates another early vernacular language, one whose cognitive value may lie in its being forgotten. If Hebrew is now remembered as the instrument of the Israelites' self-representation, then Hieroglyphic Luwian seems to have been created, over half a millennium earlier, for a similar purpose. In the Hittite empire, all documents — texts intended for correspondence, archives, and libraries — were done on clay in cuneiform writing. But every attempt to address the public, every monumental inscription proclaiming the announcements of a king, were written in a closely related, but different, dialect and a radically different writing system. Who were the readers of Luwian? In her paper, Payne traces the dialectic of two related Anatolian languages, Luwian and Lycian. She has chosen the phenomenon of bilingual inscriptions, monuments that raise a crucial question whenever they are read: which public do they speak to? A biliterate readership equally at home in two languages? A dominant minority making concessions to a restive majority who want to see their own language represented? At least in the case of the Greek-Lycian bilinguals, the linguistics of proper names suggest that difference was not politically marked, as we see every possible relationship between writing and identities, as Luwian names translate Greek and vice versa and each is transcribed into the other.

Christopher Woods' paper single-handedly revives a major debate in the history of Assyriology: what was Sumerian for? While scholars have found good reasons to see it as a dead language, confined to the realm of high culture for almost all of its written history, Woods uncovers both texts and theoretical perspectives that render such a view less likely. Ordinary people were making up names for their children in Sumerian when many have argued that it was only used by scholars. In this regard, the Akkadian story entitled, in modern times, "Why do you curse me?" may stand as an icon. The story tells of a highly learned doctor, schooled in written Sumerian, who travels to Nippur on business. There he encounters an ordinary woman who gives him directions; unable to understand the pragmatic language of her "street Sumerian," he assumes her

words represent terrible oaths and imprecations. Could this be part of the story of scholarship on Sumerian, which, like the learned doctor, has assumed that the pragmatic value of written Sumerian lay mainly in its alienation from spoken language as an exotic, dead language of ritual and mystification?

To conclude, I return to Oppenheim — as the project he spearheaded at the Oriental Institute, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, draws to a conclusion, we can see that the Oriental Institute's fundamental philological projects are succeeding. Monumental text editing and grammatical work have rendered the archive of paradise accessible. We are now free to move forward. The success of the Oriental Institute's projects challenges the next generation of scholars to move forward in different directions. While retaining our roots in the most fundamental kind of philology — indeed, one our our contributors if spearheading a second monumental work, the Chicago Hittite Dictionary — we are charged with different questions. We came together in a collective attempt to broadly and deeply examine the pragmatic and political dimensions of written language in the ancient Near East. This volume, then, represents a first attempt to interrogate the achive of paradise in a new way; to ask, "What was it for?"

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