

MARGINS OF WRITING, ORIGINS OF CULTURE

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The annual Oriental Institute Post-Doctoral Fellowships are designed to “organize and conduct a one-to-two day conference at the Oriental Institute on key comparatively-oriented theoretical or methodological issues in the field of ancient studies.” Organized by 2004/2005 Post-Doctoral Fellow Seth L. Sanders, *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures: New Approaches to Writing and Reading in the Ancient Near East* was the first in what will be a series of annual events. The conference was designed to evoke some possible answers to the question: what does ancient Near Eastern studies have to say to the rest of the academy in the twenty-first century? This year’s *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* at Chicago justly celebrated the completion of perhaps the greatest monument of ancient Near Eastern philology, the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* — a watershed that makes it especially timely to ask where we go from here.

Writing and the state both first began in the Near East. The goal of this conference was to trace their relationships in a cluster of revealing settings. The vital relationships between language and ethnicity, the connections between languages of empire and local identity, and the way languages are born, live, and die in writing still remains the subject of more speculation than rigorous research. So *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures* brought anthropologists and philologists together to illuminate 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 and imagined by ancient Near Eastern people.

The conference was designed to encourage language specialists to talk to theorists about how their material matters: what assumptions have been blinkering us? What new patterns can we discern? Each panel was structured around a conversation that included both philologists and experts in social theory, with ample room for open-ended discussion. We met over two days, on February 25–26, 2005, at the University of Chicago Oriental Institute’s James Breasted Hall. Fourteen participants attended, including University of Chicago scholars from the Oriental Institute, the Department of Anthropology, and the Department of South Asian Studies, as well as from institutions ranging from Harvard and University of California at Los Angeles to Würzburg. Piotr Michalowski, our fifteenth, was called out of the country on an urgent research trip and his contribution appears as a supplement in the book. The conference was well attended and large amounts of time were given over to discussion in which the audience participated vigorously: the contributions of William Wimsatt, Matthew Stolper, Eugene Cruz-Uribe, Lawson Younger, and Richard Beal, among many others, stand out in memory.

Even considered from a strictly philological perspective, the results were significant. The contributions of the two official participants from the Oriental Institute are good examples. Theo van den Hout’s comprehensive examination of the Luwian words in Hittite texts resulted in an argument that may overturn a half century of conventional wisdom about what the Hittite language had to do with its writers. By the time of the Late Hittite Empire, Luwian words appear widely in Hittite texts; their manner of use suggests that the daily language of most of the writers was Luwian, the same language in which the public monuments of the Empire was written. Eventually, not only the public but the intellectuals who created Hittite culture were actually Luwian speakers. Van den Hout uncovered issues we debated for two days: How was the Hittite Empire Hittite? What work goes into connecting languages to states and ethnicities? Can we ac-

tually explain Near Eastern history if we take these relationships for granted, or is history, in a significant way, actually the result of these relationships?

Christopher Woods reopened the question of when Sumerian died as a spoken language. Starting with the well-attested ethnographic fact that in pre-industrial societies it is hard to kill a language, he argued that a spectrum of evidence, ranging from idioms and loanwords to personal names and population movements implies Sumerian was spoken in some areas until the Old Babylonian period. He pointed to a wide range of common people, not erudite scholars, whose very names reflected the ability of people in southern Mesopotamia freely to produce grammatically correct sentences in Sumerian. In so doing he also drew our attention to a remarkable and little-noticed series of texts that violate our stereotypical notions of what scribes do with language. These texts come from the period when many scholars agree Sumerian was dead, yet the texts linked Sumerian to daily life and pragmatic action in the world. Linguistically, the texts were full of imperatives and demonstratives pointing to objects in the world and ordered people, including workers, to make and do things. Woods' challenge to common opinion had two provocative responses. Linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein asked whether it is enough to look at these texts as clues to what language people were speaking. He suggested that the texts we study may be even more significant when seen as tools that themselves affected language and history: how were communities held together, pushed apart, and represented by the inscribing of their languages? It is just this sort of project that Piotr Michalowski undertakes, arguing for study of the multiple lives of Sumerian as all equally significant, concluding with the striking point that "most if not all of the long, complex, and extremely rich life of the recorded Sumerian language and of its cultural traditions was posthumous."

Two scholars from outside of Near Eastern studies raised fundamental questions about the political role of writing that may prove useful to scholars wishing to strike out in new directions and surmount old impasses. A classic definition has it that the state is a "monopoly of legitimate physical force" within a given territory. But how do people know that violence is legitimate? Anthropologist John Kelly argued that any history of the state's monopoly of coercion is shadowed by the question of its monopoly of communication. He pointed to comparative evidence from India, where control of writing was never held by kings but by monasteries and Sanskrit spread far beyond the boundaries of any South Asian state, as well as China, where the state vigorously monopolized communication, setting standards for writing from an early time. We debated how the histories of cuneiform, a cosmopolitan and universal system used by multiple empires to write no less than seven totally unrelated language families, contrasted with those of Hebrew and Luwian, deliberately local writing systems that were unintelligible outside the boundaries of local communities. What kind of a message does an unintelligible inscription send? Or, as the Luwian scholar Annick Payne asked, what about a bilingual written in a subordinate local language and a dominant imperial language? How do these histories of communication dovetail with the histories of the Near Eastern state and its attempted monopolies on violence?

Sheldon Pollock provided a strong critique of our habitual reduction of ancient Near Eastern politics to "identity," "ideology," and "legitimation." Pointing out that obligatory scare quotes often hide an unwillingness to confront the consequences of an idea (if you believe it is really an ideology, why do you need to call it an "ideology"?), he argued that we could learn more from our texts if we refused to hide behind borrowed theories of which we are not entirely convinced. He noted remarkable patterns in the division of linguistic labor, such as societies which used entirely different written languages for different social purposes (as in the Assyrian and Babylonian pattern, beautifully detailed by Paul-Alain Beaulieu, which used cuneiform for

RESEARCH

monuments, archives, and literature and Aramaic for mundane daily communication). Why are some languages only written down (literated) but never used for literary purposes, to imagine new worlds (literated)? These patterns in the use of language represent major ways writing is used to create historical memory, senses of belonging and place. If traced further, they may open new pathways, ways our evidence can yet astonish us and lead to insights we have only barely glimpsed.

The conference was also logistically successful. With the help of the eager participants and the energy and enthusiasm of Olivia Boyd, Steve Camp, and Eliza Riffe, everything came in on time and under budget. The conference is the first of a series designed to give recent Ph.D.'s the opportunity to bring scholars together around an interdisciplinary topic and publish the proceedings. In this regard this maiden voyage was also successful: the organizer was able to edit the proceedings (to be published by the Oriental Institute by the end of the year) as well as complete a book of his own (in press with the University of Illinois). This book, *Vernacular Revelation: The Language of the Hebrew Bible and the Politics of Ancient Israel*, draws extensively on the results of the conference. As an inexpensive and conveniently packaged paperback, it is hoped that the *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures* volume will also serve as a resource both within and beyond Near Eastern studies. The archive of paradise, as Herder called the oldest writings of civilization, can provide surprising perspectives on large-scale historical patterns of media and power, encouraging us to think "outside the box" of modernity.
