Too Much Writing, Too Few Scribes

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Too Much Writing, Too Few Scribes

Extra-Scribal Writing in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean (1650–1100 BCE)

Edited by
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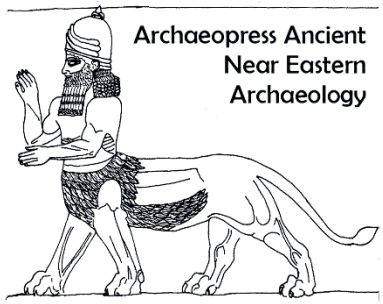

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Too much writing, too few scribes: Extra-scribal writing in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean (1650-1100 BCE)[1]

Cassandra M. Donnelly

The present volume focuses on writing practices which fall outside of the scribal paradigm that dominates scholarship on ancient writing. In the scribal paradigm, writing is a guarded technology, transmitted through scribal schools. Scribal education comprises small group instruction in how to write and create texts from canon. The resulting education produces texts with high levels of paleographical uniformity, even as regionalisms can be observed in other aspects of text construction.[2] Today, it is widely recognized that the scribal paradigm does not explain many aspects of writing in the ancient world.[3] Take, for instance, the mercantile literacy of Old Assyrian Kaneš.[4] Nevertheless, the scribal model and its terminology still dominates scholarly discourse on Late Bronze Age writing practices. The present volume explores writing and marking practices not covered in the scribal model and provides alternative terminologies for discussing extra-scribal phenomenon. Inspired by the material turn in the study of writing, the present volume explores the interface between writing, marking, and materiality.[5]

'Extra-scribal writing,' as interpreted by the contributors to this volume, encompasses a wide range of activities. It includes writing not produced by scribes, marking practices, and types of writing produced by scribes, but which have been marginalized in traditional studies of ancient writing, such as writing on ostraca and wax tablets. Uniting the papers is a strong emphasis on the material dimensions of writing. Contributors to the volume include both epigraphers and archaeologists and those of us whose training falls somewhere in between. Other focal points are the construction of meaning, the definitions of and interfaces between writing, marking and literacy.

Geographic areas range from Egypt to the Aegean and to Anatolia and the Levant, the so-called "Western Periphery" of cuneiform culture. Missing are contributions from the "center" of cuneiform culture in Assyria and Babylonia. The *Call for Papers* (CfP) invited zero expressions of interest for papers on material from the cuneiform cultural center. It is the editor's belief that the absence of contributions from the heart of cuneiform culture is incidental and not because extra-scribal writing practices were not common in the center. It will be interesting to see if extra-scribal paradigms will feature more prominently in cuneiform studies in future years.

Regional Contexts of Writing

Writing practices vary considerably from the Aegean to Egypt. As such, what constitutes 'extra-scribal' also varies, as reflected in the different topics covered by contributions rooted in different geographic regions. Contributions to the volume have not been organized geographically, though they could have been. A synthesis of writing practices from each broad region brings to the fore some common themes that arise due to the distinctive contexts of writing in each region.

Eastern Mediterranean (Egypt)

Contributions on Egyptian writing practices focus, by and large, on writing media not traditionally covered in Egyptological study but which are nevertheless often the products of scribal officials. In New Kingdom Egypt (c. 1570-1070), many officials with different levels of literacy and scribal education produced texts, resulting in an embarrassment of riches in terms of numbers and types of texts. Scribes worked in religious and administrative spheres, in temples, centers of commerce, and oases; they wrote on ostraca, papyrus,

[1] This project was completed over the course of several years, the last of which under the auspices of ComPAS Project ("Commercial Patterns Across the Sea"), European Research Council Starting Grant 947749.

[2] For an overview and critique of the traditional narrative, see Eleanor Robson, "The Production and Dissemination of Scholarly Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Eleanor Robson and Karen Radner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 557–76.

[3] Niek Veldhuis, "Levels of Literacy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, 2011, 73.

[4] For instance, Mogens Trolle Larsen *Ancient Kanesh: A Merchant Colony in Bronze Age Anatolia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 54ff.

[5] A selection of relevant titles with bibliographies as pertains to writing in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean, Francisca A. J. Hoogendijk and Steffie van Gompel, eds., *The Materiality of Texts from Ancient Egypt: New Approaches to the Study of Textual Material from the Early Pharaonic to the Late Antique Period* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018); Kathryn E. Piquette and Ruth D. Whitehouse, eds., *Writing as Material Practice: Substance, Surface, and Medium* (London: ubiquity press, 2013); Anna Margherita Jasink, Judith Weingarten, and Silvia Ferrara, eds. *Non-Scribal Communication Media in the Bronze Age Aegean and Surrounding Areas: The Semantics of a-Literate and Proto-Literate Media,* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2018); Philip J. Boyes, *Script and Society: The Social Context and Writing Practices in Late Bronze Age Ugarit*, (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2021).

wooden boards, stone walls, monuments, and on everyday objects. The contributors likewise cover a range of writing media and practices.

Two contributions focus on ostraca (Chapters 5 and 9), which scholarship has seldom treated as scribal products of equal value to texts on papyrus but rather as ephemeral documents of only administrative importance. The contributions here show otherwise. Bandy's contribution (Chapter 9) investigates the materiality of the ostraca, focusing on types and sizes of vessels chosen as writing media and the writing practices of the administrative scribes who made them. Bandy shows that some ostraca were not ephemera but used for medium- and long-term storage. Van der Moezel (Chapter 5) studies ostraca that were not produced by scribal administrators but record workers' rolls using a graphic system comprised of script and non-script signs, the famous Deir el-Medina ostraca. Van der Moezel's contribution explores the cognitive processes through which non-script signs were encoded with meaning, their creation and evolution over time.

Another two contributions (Chapters 2 and 8) look at writing on stone, a common writing medium in ancient Egypt but one usually studied in its monumental capacity. Lazaridis's paper (Chapter 2) studies graffiti made by travelers passing through the Kharga Oasis and the ways that graffiti texts diverge from 'mainstream' texts on papyrus. He also reflects on the ways our own 'scribal training' as scholars leads us to classify certain types of writing as divergent and not others. Algarvio's paper (Chapter 8) similarly engages with the ways that scholarly bias can sometimes obscure rather than illuminate the nature of the texts we study. Writing as a Book Historian Algarvio argues that Book History should begin with rather than exclude Egyptian texts on stone, which, after all, are often blithely called "Books" (cf. Book of the Dead, etc.) but nevertheless excluded from book history.

A final contribution on Egypt by Hertel (Chapter 10), in contrast to the above contributions, focuses on the paradigmatic Egyptian writing medium, the papyrus, typologizing practices of text erasure. Noting the relative absence of references to text erasure in the Egyptian literary canon, Hertel explores the abundant record of text erasures, widening the scope of the study of writing to include its absence.

The Eastern Mediterranean (Anatolia, Cyprus, the Levant)

Writing practices from the 'northern' Eastern Mediterranean vary greatly from region to region. Both the Levant and Anatolia are considered the Western Periphery of cuneiform culture, while Cyprus is often not counted in the Western periphery, though it could be. Although no cuneiform inscriptions have been found in Cyprus outside of the occasional seal, petrographic analysis of the Amarna letters and letters found at Ugarit indicate that cuneiform writing, however limited, was produced on Cyprus.[6] In addition to producing cuneiform texts, each area in question produced its own local script(s) and employed still others. Anatolia had Luwian Hieroglyphs; Cyprus, the Cypro-Minoan script; and the Northern Levant had a smattering of scripts including the Ugaritic and Byblos scripts. Each had a different context of writing, which means that 'extra-scribal' writing can look quite different in each region.

The amount of writing produced in Late Bronze Age Anatolia, most of it clay tablets inscribed in syllabic cuneiform, must have been significant given the over 25,000 cuneiform clay tablets found at Hattuša. Advertisements for Luwian Hieroglyphic scribal services carved into stones facing the streets of Hattuša indicate that script was a visible part of daily life in the capital, even if literacy might not have been.[7] Broadly speaking, in Anatolia, logosyllabic cuneiform was used to record historical, ritual, and diplomatic texts in mainly the Hittite language on clay tablets and sealings, and the script was transmitted in cuneiform cultural scribal settings. In contrast, Luwian Hieroglyphs predominate on monumental inscriptions on stone and certain types of seals and sealings in stone and clay. The script of daily administration is much debated but was likely recorded on wax-coated wooden tablets.[8] The mechanisms of script transmission and its attendant institutional settings for Luwian Hieroglyphs are not known, but cuneiform writing was learned in scribal schools modeled on the Near Eastern prototype but with some regional variation.[9]

[6] Yuval Goren, Israel Finkelstein, and Nadav Na'aman, *Inscribed in Clay: Provenance Study of the Amarna Tablets and Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, (Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2004), 49-73; Philip J. Boyes and Philippa M. Steele, "A Comparative Approach to Methods of Inscribing Clay Tablets: Interaction and Innovation in Cyprus and Ugarit." in *New Approaches to the Materiality of Text in the Ancient Mediterranean: From Monuments and Buildings to Small Portable Objects*, eds. Erica Angliker and Ilaria Bultrighini, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2023), 35–52.

[7] Most recently, Massimiliano Marazzi, "Die sogenannten 'eingepuntzten' Hieroglypheninschriften von Boğazköy," in *Audias Fabulas Veteres. Anatolian Studies in Honor of Jana Součková-Siegelová*, ed. Šarka Velhartická, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 194–209. For a minimalist interpretation of literacy at Hattuša, see Theo van den Hout, *A History of Hittite Literacy: Writing and Reading in Late Bronze Age Anatolia (1650-1200 BC)*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[8] For a brief summary of the debates, along with bibliography, see Cammarosano (this volume).

[9] Shai Gordin, "Scriptoria in Late Empire Period Hattusa: The Case of the É GIŠ.KIN.TI," in *Pax Hethitica: Studies on the Hittites and Their Neighbors in Honour of Itamar Singer*, eds. Yoram Cohen, Amir Gilan, and Jared L. Miller, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 158–77.

Less is known about the volume of script production in Cyprus and even less about Lebanon. The dominant script used on Cyprus was Cypro-Minoan (c. 1650-1050 BCE). Though its corpus consists of a meagre 250+ inscriptions, the paleographic variety and idiosyncratic nature of its writing media, combined with the extensive potmarking tradition which includes the use of script signs, would seem to indicate that writing on Cyprus was more prevalent than the small number of surviving inscriptions indicate.[10] Writing seems to have been transmitted outside of scribal schools, though scribal education may be in evidence in a small number of texts from Enkomi (E. Masson's "CM 2").[11] Petrographic analysis shows that a small number of cuneiform texts were produced on Cyprus but none have been recovered from Cyprus itself, which would suggest only limited use of the script on Cyprus.

Even less is known about the production of writing in Lebanon, an area which attests a multiplicity of scripts but from which little writing survives. The Byblos script, with its small archaeological imprint, was a local script used to record an unknown language and was in use for a limited time period.[12] Less than 100 cuneiform tablets or textual references to letters sent from the region of modern-day Lebanon indicate that knowledge of cuneiform writing was present in the region.[13] Proto-Canaanite or early alphabet inscriptions are notably lacking, though linear alphabetic inscriptions from the Late Bronze Age are found to the north in modern-day Syria and to the south in modern-day Israel. Less than ten alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions including ones in the so-called "short" or "reduced" cuneiform alphabet are found scattered throughout Lebanon, and small but uncertain numbers of Hieroglyphic Egyptian inscriptions have also been found mostly on small, elite portable objects.[14] Overall, the picture of writing practices in Lebanon is far from clear.

Two contributions (Chapters 1 and 7) explore a similar phenomenon on Cyprus and Lebanon, the interface between potmarking practices and script traditions. Peršin's paper (Chapter 7) takes the subject head on, first providing an overview of potmarking practices in Lebanon before proceeding to a discussion of possible continuities in the potmark and Byblos script sign repertoires. Teresa Bürge's contribution (Chapter 1) on the potmark practices of Hala Sultan Tekke, an urban center on the southern coast of Cyprus where she is co-director of excavations, provides a contextual analysis of potmarking practices from the site and offers new observations concerning the functions and types of marked vessels. Bürge's paper also interrogates the interface between script and marks and raises substantial questions for further study.

Turning to Anatolia, Cammarosano's paper (Chapter 11) reconstructs the usage of wax-coated writing boards in Anatolia, reimagining an abundance of writing from a dearth of surviving material evidence. The use of writing boards in Anatolia is assured through textual references, but the interpretation of their significance for the prevalence of literacy and Luwian hieroglyphic script use remains ours to realize. Cammarosano engages with these questions through a contextual and typological analysis of Hittite styluses and presents a strong argument for how to identify styluses in the archaeological record that is broadly applicable to other sites in the region where wax-coated wooden writing boards might have been used.

The Aegean

Evidence for writing in the Aegean is relatively meagre compared to the cuneiform world and, at least in the case of Linear B, much more restricted in use. Most writing in the Bronze Age Aegean is administrative, and such writing is likewise the focus of concern in scholarship. Administrative clay tablets in the Cretan Hieroglyphic, Linear A, and Linear B scripts record the transactions of regional 'palatial' administrative centers. The number of writers at any given time in the Aegean is believed to be low, as few as 50 at Knossos and 20 at Pylos.[15] Scholars of Aegean scripts often use scribal language to describe their writers, though the consensus is that they were administrators first and foremost and writers second and that the term 'scribe' is not strictly suitable.[16]

The three Aegean contributions to the volume (Chapters 3, 4, and 6) concentrate on non-administrative dimensions of Aegean writing and sealing practices and

[10] Martina Polig and Cassandra M. Donnelly, "Between Frustration and Progress: An Integrated Cypro-Minoan Signary and Its Paleographic Diversity," *Studi Micenei Ed Egeo-Anatolici Nuova Serie* 8 (2022): 41–62.

[11] Cassandra M. Donnelly, "The Cypro-Minoan Script." In *Cambridge Companion to Aegean Bronze Age Writing*, ed. Jörg Weilhartner, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[12] Juan-Pablo Vita and José-Ángel Zamora, "The Byblos Script," In *Paths into Script Formation in the Ancient Mediterranean*, (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2018), 75–102.

[13] For a summary of texts with relevant bibliography, Juan-Pablo Vita, "Akkadian in Syria and Canaan." In *History of the Akkadian Language. Vol. 2: The Second and First Millennia BCE. Afterlife.*, ed. Juan-Pablo Vita, (Leiden-Chicago: Brill, 2021), 1213–1265.

[14] Boyes, *Script and Society*, 53-55 and 57-59.

[15] Kevin Michael Pluta, "Aegean Bronze Age Literacy and Its Consequences," Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2011, 259, table 6.4.

[16] For example, the titles of the classic texts as follows, Jean-Pierre Olivier, *Les Scribes de Cnossos. Essai de Classement Des Archives d'un palais Mycénien*, (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1967); Thomas G. Palaima, *The Scribes of Pylos*, (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1988); Thomas G. Palaima, "Scribes, Scribal Hands and Palaeography," in *A Companion to Linear B. Mycenaean Texts and Their World* 2, eds. Yves Duhoux and Anna Morpurgo Davies (Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium: Peeters, 2011), 33–136. Concerning the administrative role of Aegean scribes and the inadequacy of scribal terminology, Pluta, "Aegean Bronze Age Literacy," 254-262.

engage with the question of Aegean literacy and the construction of meaning. Finlayson's paper (Chapter 6) is a meditation on seals and the multitudes of potential meaning they contain both for their wearers and viewers. Finlayson shows how a seal's various features, such as shape, size, and color, could imbue it with a myriad of meanings extending beyond its administrative function. Salgarella's paper (Chapter 4) turns to other types of seals, clay roundels, noduli and sealings, through a close paleographical and material study, which sheds light on literacy at the edges of centralized administration. The theme of literacy is also explored in Rice's paper (Chapter 3) using stone libation tables as a case study. Rice investigates and describes the production processes involved in writing on stone and the various relationships with writing the craftspeople responsible for their production might have had.

Editorial Seminars

The contributions in the present volume have been organized according to themes explored in the "Editorial Seminars" that formed its basis, the brainchild of Shane M. Thompson and Eric M. Trinka. In response to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, Thompson and Trinka developed the concept of a quarantine-friendly version of a small conference or workshop, the so-called "Editorial Seminar." Instead of gathering in-person for presentations and discussion and then producing a conference volume, the contributors to an Editorial Seminar would take advantage of video conferencing's ability to put scholars from around the world in sustained conversation; and instead of presenting lectures, contributors would meet periodically over video conference to discuss their papers as works-in-progress and then exchange papers with one another for review. The result would a collaborative, non-blind peer-reviewed publication.

Because of the volume's experimental nature and the current peer-review crisis facing many academic disciplines, I discuss and assess the editorial seminar process in some detail. The non-blind, collaborative peer review process we implemented provides an alternative model to a double-blind peer review process and to in-person conferences, with the benefit of being inclusive and accessible for scholars unable to travel. In what follows, I present a brief overview of the editorial seminars in their original conception, what actually happened in practice, and reflections on their successes and failures.

In their original conception, the editorial seminars were intended to consist of three online sessions corresponding to three stages of paper preparation: outline, rough draft, and final draft, during which participants would present their papers and receive critiques. After the session, participants would submit their drafts to the same two colleagues and receive editorial feedback. In this way, participants would become generally familiar with each contribution to the volume and careful readers of two contributions. The intended result would be a volume that, while not necessarily thematically coherent, would have the invisible thread of mutual influence and seminar feedback running through it. In actuality, only two editorial seminars were held after a *communis opinio* was reached that discussing paper drafts was not particularly interesting. In their place, participants suggested that we hold subject-matter seminars, two of which were held over the course of a year and a half.

Two subject-matter seminars were organized, one "thematic" and the other "topical". Several different impetuses lay behind the decision to organize topical and thematic seminar: 1. To provide participants with supplemental readings and stimulate discussion on relatively under-studied aspects of ancient writing, 2. To foster cross-disciplinarity, and, 3. To provide common practical and theoretical frameworks that might lend the volume coherence despite its geographically and culturally far flung contributions. In the meantime, contributors were placed in peer-review triads that were responsible for editing one another's papers at scheduled intervals.

The first "topical" seminars were held in late winter 2022, at a time when many countries were experiencing some version of lockdown or quarantine. The seminar topics were "Writing on Stone and Ostraca," "Linear Scripts," "Potmarks," and "Cuneiform Culture." Each seminar group consisted of 4-5 contributors. In this first round of seminars, the topics grouped contributors according to the writing practices they studied, with the effect that the groups were less interdisciplinary than originally intended. The "Ostraca and Stone" group consisted exclusively of Egyptologists, for instance, while "Cuneiform Culture" grouped together scholars of the Ancient Near East. More cross-disciplinary were the potmark and Linear script groups where Aegeanists, Cypriot and Levantine archaeologists were together in the same groups.

The participants of each group were responsible for the organization and content of the sessions. They provided one another with readings related to their own contributions and worked through methodological and theoretical problems they were confronting. One of the most constructive groupings was the "potmark" seminar. Since potmarks are understudied and often underpublished, it was a unique opportunity to compare regional practices within the relatively narrow timeframe. One of the most interesting outcomes of

the seminar, reflected in numerous contributions to present volume, was the common observation that signs from potmark repertoires are often drawn from and appear on other media.

The "thematic" seminars were held on zoom in early summer 2022, once travel and communal gatherings had become more commonplace, covering "craft literacy," "meaning making," "non-scribal writing," and "materiality and object history." The thematic seminars were by and large more successful than the topical seminars and left more of a lasting imprint on the book you have in front of you, as reflected in the grouping of chapters (with slight modification). I attribute the vitality of the thematic seminars to their cross-disciplinarity, the growing familiarity among participants, and the low-stakes nature of the forum.

Particularly influential were seminars on "meaning making" and "non-scribal writing." The meaning-making seminar explored the inadequacy of Peircean models of meaning construction, taking as examples the multivalence and contextually contingent meanings of Deir el-Medina marks, Aegean seals, and Lebanese potmarks, and considering how these examples collapse the hierarchy between writing and mark. The nonscribal group took as their point of departure an article by Michael C. A. Macdonald, "On the use of writing in ancient Arabia and the role of paleography in studying them," and discussed spectrums of literacy and the distinctions between informal education, formal education, and scribal education in writing.[17] The themes developed in these seminars run through the contributions even when they are not explicitly addressed.

The value of the editorial seminar approach was in the low-stakes platform for cross-disciplinary discussion on topics outside of the scholarly mainstream. The rather narrow chronological scope facilitated and enhanced the value of the cross-disciplinary conversations. The quality of the seminars was in direct proportion to the effort participants put into them, which varied from topic to topic and theme to theme. Some groups had an immediate chemistry and clarity of purpose that resulted in seminar sessions that I thought about for weeks afterward. Other seminars made me feel like a teacher who had given out too much homework. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the seminars were substantial, including illnesses to seminar participants and their loved ones, the mental health toll caused by isolation and the varying levels of support provided by different universities. All in all, the thematic and topical seminars were more successful than the two "Editorial Seminars" proper where papers were discussed.

A main failure of the volume lay in a poor scheduling decision which was compounded by the precarity of the academic discipline for young scholars. The decision to schedule the seminars over the course of 1.5 years meant that five of the original 16 participants dropped out of the volume and that there were intermittent lags in momentum. A narrower timeline of a single year would have likely retained more contributors and maintained momentum. Between taxing job applications for too few jobs and tenure packet applications, some young scholars pulled their contributions to the volume or dropped out of academia completely.

The non-blind peer review process was largely successful, especially in terms of engaging with a writer's ideas, their organization and presentation. Less successful was editing for style and grammar. Contributors worked in groups of three, which were matched as best as possible for subject matter expertise. Every member of the peer-review triad submitted for review a rough draft and final draft of their paper and reviewed the rough and final drafts of the other two members in the triad. Reviews were recorded in word documents, though some groups supplemented their written reviews with video conferences.

As editor, I followed the peer review processes, read the drafts and reviews at every stage, but did not impose editorial interventions until the final drafts. I found that the final drafts showed marked improvements in content and concept from the rough draft stages, as one would hope would be the outcome of any peer review process, blind or not. I saw only minimal evidence that contributors were reluctant to engage critically with one another. The high level of critical engagement suggested to me that 'blindness' is not a necessary pre-condition for criticism. Perhaps unexpectedly, contributors seemed most reluctant to criticize elements of one another's grammar and style, which thankfully are correctible at the later stages of editorial intervention. Through the collaborative peer-review process, I became convinced that collaborative, non-blind peer-review is a valid and effective method of scholarly criticism.

Conclusion

Extra-scribal writing is a promising avenue of study because of the ways it critically engages with the concept of literacy, how it combines philological and archaeological approaches, and focuses on 'non-elite' practices. As the volume demonstrates, what scholars consider "extra-scribal" varies from discipline to discipline in the same way that extra-scribal practices

[17] Michael C. A. Macdonald, "On the Uses of Writing in Ancient Arabia and the Role of Paleography in Studying Them," *Arabian Epigraphic Notes 1* (2015): 1–50.

varied considerably in the ancient world. The variety of writing materials, scripts, and marking practices used in the different regions addressed show that writing and other forms of graphic expression were not, as a rule, carefully guarded or restricted. Writing and marking were made visible to people from various walks in the Late Bronze Age. Recent scholarship, this book included, is beginning to integrate extra-scribal practices into our narratives about ancient writing practices and to reshape them.

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