

Preface

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This volume is intended to be the first in a series that will focus on the origin of script and the boundaries of non-scribal communication media in proto-literate and literate societies. Over the last 30 years, the domain of scribes and bureaucrats has become much better known. Our goal now is to reach below the élite and scribal levels to interface with non-scribal operations conducted by people of the «middling» sort. Who made these marks and to what purpose? Did they serve private or (semi-) official roles in Bronze Age Aegean society? The comparative study of such practices in the contemporary East (Cyprus, Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt) can shed light on sub-élite activities in the Aegean and also provide evidence for cultural and economic exchange networks.

Writing is a complex aspect of human behaviour, whose underlying mechanisms, genesis, inception and applied principles still deserve an exhaustive investigation in the specific contexts of its use. A close examination of the relationship between a fully-fledged writing system and the emblems, icons, symbols devoid of phonographic connotations, needs to be explored. *Periploi 9* sets the scene for such dynamic and fluid interactions, exploring the underpinnings and the preconditions that intermingle before, during and after the introduction of a functioning writing system.

From a methodological standpoint, we asked our contributors to explore the grey areas of this interface, to characterise a specific, if still neglected phenomenon, which we could refer to as the «broad concept of literacy», to shed light on what happens when communication, not strictly or uniquely in the specificities of linguistic notation, is harnessed through different media and to different purposes. This phenomenon encompasses symbols for marking or identifying objects, commodities, transactions, property and the like.

Our intention is to not shy away from attributing meaning to these mechanisms, but rather to pinpoint the cultural implications of the different agendas at play (whether ideological, utilitarian or tied to social differentiation), while addressing local complexities and patterns of progressive centralised control. This effort is geared towards building a full contextual environment for the whole of the Aegean, with counterpoints provided by other regions of the Eastern Mediterranean. This is why particular attention has been devoted to the role of marking systems as starting points for the development of script in response to new or expanding socio-economic needs.

It is of paramount importance however, to state two caveats at the outset. The first is that our intention was never to imply that para-literacy, intended as the set of symbols broadly recognised as communicative and meaningful, should be taken as a specific and easily identifiable precursor or forerunner to the inception of a fully-functioning, complete writing system. The aim has always been, rather, to capture whether the relationship between two separate, if related phenomena, can be understood better by looking closely at specific contexts, activities, and perceptions of, on the one hand, a broad symbolic apparatus, and, on the other, the earliest attestations of writing. We are interested in the trajectories, the interactions and the processes that make symbols active players in the life of the individuals that selected, used, discarded, and redeployed them in the course of the 2nd millennium BC.

Our request to our authors has been not to draw conclusions, from an interpretative standpoint, but to test the data systematically. The second word of caution was to maintain an open mind as to whether we can recognise the historical conditions that lead to writing as a system. This implies that we have sacrificed the idea, to an extent, that purpose and necessity will create the successful seedbed for writing, and that the big administration is always to be taken as the only guiding force that produces writing and makes it a successful endeavour.

This book marks a novel effort to characterise and, to an extent, explain the interconnectedness of writing to the «alternative», visible, if non-institutionalised, modes of interaction and communication. The scope for investigating the world of marks, sealings, measures, isolated «logograms», pictograms, tokens, and identity marks at large in the Eastern Mediterranean is still enormous. We hope that this contribution will shorten the distance to a full understanding of visual communication in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

We believe, since the idea for this book first took shape, that it is only through an interdisciplinary outlook that this complex theme can be addressed. After a number of ‘philosophical’ discussions on its intricacies, first between Judith Weingarten and Anna Margherita Jasink, then with the addition of Silvia Ferrara, that the idea of investigating the symbols that gravitate around writing began to crystallize. It is from the informal setting of friendly and lively communications between the editors, and extended to experts in the Aegean, the Near East, and Egypt that *Periploi 9* was envisioned. Our firm belief, shared by the contributors, is that whatever is still uncertain, unreadable, opaque and still open to interpretation, can be better understood only through a systematic and multi-faceted approach. Through the lenses of history and the theory of writing, linguistics, archaeology, anthropology and semiotics, our authors accepted the challenge to confront the intricacies of our subject with rigour, critical thinking, and enthusiasm.