

## Book Reviews

Philippa M. Steele and Philip J. Boyes, eds. *Writing Around the Ancient Mediterranean: Practices and Adaptations* (Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems 6. Oxford & Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2022, 320 pp., hbk, ISBN 978-1-78925-850-9)

Writing has proven a fascinating, as well as fruitful, topic in recent scholarly discussions of the ancient world. *Writing Around the Ancient Mediterranean: Practices and Adaptations* represents a most welcome contribution to this field of study, offering twelve chapters on aspects of relations between scripts covering a broad geographic and chronological span. It stems from an online conference held in November 2021 featuring members of the Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems (CREWS) research team and visiting fellows and it represents the sixth monograph in the series of this valuable and productive ERC-funded project (<https://crewsproject.wordpress.com/>).

As explained in the Introduction chapter, which was written in a much-appreciated friendly fresh style by Philippa Steele, Principal Investigator of the project, the editors' aim is to explore writing practices with the awareness that writing in any society can only be understood fully in its own terms and within its own unique contexts. Moving beyond the traditional emphasis on linguistic properties, this book takes into consideration how different writing practices changed as a consequence of complex and socially contextualized motivations.

Given the variety of the topics, chapters will be critically discussed in ascending order. Chapter 2 (by Csaba A. La'da) explores the multi-functionality of scripts, with a specific focus on the Greek alphabet; the author examines the alphabet's primary aim of recording phonetically a

spoken language and identifies the secondary usages of its characters deriving from their fixed order. The author lists as secondary functions of ancient writing the following: numerals, cryptography, musical notation, and alphabetization. Nevertheless, although the notation of non-linguistic information, that is numerical and musical notations, can be safely understood as secondary functions, the arrangement of textual information in alphabetical order, ciphering and deciphering a text could be better understood as acts or processes involving a written linguistic message (therefore the primary function of writing). Other possible functions, as for example covering an object with an (apparently) nonsense message for an aesthetic or religious/magical purpose or with the aim of increasing its value in restricted literacy societies (Cadorna, 2009), are explored in Chapter 6.

Chapter 3 (by Michel de Vreeze) offers an insightful reflection on the social context of alphabetic writing in the Bronze Age southern Levant and how it might explain the 'death' of some of these alphabetic traditions. The author sets the cultic context of writing at Deir 'Alla and Lachish and suggests that the limited evidence available thus far is a consequence of the restricted use of Deir 'Alla and alphabetic cuneiform scripts (at Ugarit and a few other sites), rather than a result of conservation problems. Although this is not an entirely new perspective (see for example Koller, 2018), it is helpfully illustrative of the social role of writing.

Chapter 4 (by Cassandra Donnelly) addresses a highly debated question in Aegean studies: should single-sign texts be considered inscriptions? Traditionally, they are not included in the inscriptions corpora unless they are administrative texts (e.g. Linear A clay nodules) or logograms, but, as Olivier (2007: 16) candidly admits, this is in part due to practical reasons: they are too many. Moreover, when we only have one sign it may be difficult to even establish to which Aegean script it may belong, especially if the archaeological context is not conclusive in this regard. The author, however, focuses on a particular case that is not affected by this last problem: Bronze Age Cypriot vessels featuring one or two signs, which are otherwise attested in Cypro-Minoan. Through a careful and very interesting comparison with certain Cypro-Syllabic and likely Cypro-Minoan abbreviations on other media, it is argued that they bear phonetic abbreviations and that the same sign consistently abbreviates the same word, whether found isolated or coupled with another sign. Although this last conclusion may sound more speculative, it is well argued. I might have suggested adding Cretan Hieroglyphic to the author's account of evidence for phonetic abbreviations in Aegean scripts (53–54), even by just referring to Decorte's work (2017: 41–42).

Chapter 5 (by Martina Polig) presents an impressive palaeographical work carried out through high quality 3D documentation of Cypro-Minoan sign shapes. This is a hot topic nowadays, as other ground-breaking studies have been recently published (Corazza et al., 2022). The study of stroke types and their use across the corpus indeed helps to set objective criteria for spotting the diagnostic traits of each sign and, consequently, for distinguishing palaeographical variants of the same sign and different signs.

Chapter 6 (by Philip J. Boyes) stands as a useful and inspiring overview on the

practice of writing as a fundamental and necessary part of magical rites in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Levant. It reads very well, though some illustrated examples would have helped visualizing the practices and texts described.

Chapter 7 (by Willemijn Waal) is fascinating in its theoretical approach. It investigates the origins of Anatolian hieroglyphic script by trying to reconstruct early missing documents. Hittite cuneiform tablets make mention of wooden documents, without specifying the writing system or tradition they belong to. The author suggests they were inscribed with Anatolian hieroglyphs. So far the arguments are very clearly explained and seem effective to the reviewer, although not conclusive. They become definitively thinner and more speculative when it comes to how these missing documents might have looked. Here there are two main possible answers: 1) writing boards filled with wax, like those known from first millennium Mesopotamia; 2) strips of bark inscribed with ink. It is suggested the second hypothesis is preferable because this particular document shape would have given rise to the arrangement in long horizontal registers with short vertical columns, which represents the 'conventional' layout of almost all large Anatolian hieroglyphic texts. Nevertheless, none of the written barks and wooden tablets whose images are fruitfully reproduced as *comparanda* show such an arrangement.

Chapter 8 (by Rostislav Oreshko) is an effective contribution to the study of the phonetic values of three rare letters of the Phrygian alphabet (nos. 19, 20, and 23) and their origins. For each of these signs a list of attestations and discussion of the more meaningful for the phonetic interpretation are provided. The reader is also adequately directed to scholarship for previous hypotheses, which are often challenged (e.g. Obrador-Cursach, 2020,

which currently stands as the most recent comprehensive study of the Phrygian language, texts, and lexicon). On the grounds of chronological and structural evidence, the author puts forward a novel explanation for the Phrygian rare lunette-like sign that was previously interpreted as a sort of interpunction sign (Brixhe & Summers, 2006), as an early variant of sign no. 20, which in turn might find a later development in the Pamphylian alphabet. Finally, sign no. 23 is suggested to correspond to the Ionian *sampi*, and no. 19 to Carian and Lydian arrow-shaped letters.

Chapter 9 (by Natalia Elvira Astoreca) is one of the most ground-breaking of the book. It uses the computational methodology of Natural Language Processing (NLP) to measure the similarities and differences between the regional Archaic Greek alphabets. More specifically, it uses the TF-IDF technique (Term Frequency – Inverse Document Frequency) that is normally used to measure the similarity between different texts. Such a method reveals meaningful patterns very rapidly and systematically, whereas traditional methods were more time consuming and generally based on a selection of letters. Nevertheless, as also stressed by the author, the automatic measures are affected by the imbalance of the data (for some areas they are very fragmentary, whereas other regions are very well represented) and consequently the resulting calculations should still be assessed by experts in Greek epigraphy and linguistics through a qualitative analysis aimed at identifying possible biases and skewed results.

Chapter 10 (by Beatrice Pestarino) looks at the arrival of the Greek alphabet in Cyprus and the social context of its first employment. The earliest evidence for the Greek alphabet on the island dates back to the sixth century BC, a period when it is argued that different languages and scripts were used by foreign people who were

either occasionally visiting or living in Cyprus. It is also a period when the contacts between Cyprus and Greece and other Mediterranean centres where the Greek alphabet was already widespread were increasing. Looking at the distribution of the Greek alphabet in Cyprus during the Archaic period, the author stresses that it is limited to epitaphs of members of the elites. It is well argued that scripts may also convey socio-cultural messages by their visual impact and thus suggested that the borrowing of the Greek alphabet is bound up with the attempts of Cypriot elites to establish their authority through connections with the wider Greek-speaking world.

Chapter 11 (by Robert S.D. Crellin) puts into question the common view that *scriptio continua* (i.e. writing characters as a stream without any indication of word breaks) was the norm for writing in the Roman period and that it was in the Medieval period that word-spacing was re-introduced (*inter al.* Dickey, 2017). By investigating the development and types of word division in Latin and Greek inscriptions from Sicily of the Imperial period, it is pointed out that word-level punctuation in Greek persisted well into the Empire. The Sicilian evidence also speaks in favour of the existence of both prosodic and morphosyntactic punctuation strategies in Latin. Wider questions about where, when, and why word division was first employed in Greek and Latin are left open for future research.

The book closes with a novel creative Chapter (12) written by an art director and designer from outside academia (Charles Rickleton). It constitutes an attempt to put the Cypriot syllabary in a modern context by exploring ways to modernize the syllabary and adapt it to Modern Greek and contemporaneous uses of writing.

To sum up, most of the chapters are contemplative in nature, offering new perspectives on well-established problems, but

the content of the book is overall of an impressive quality.

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Eleni Hasaki. *Potters at Work in Ancient Corinth: Industry, Religion, and the Penteskouphia Pinakes* (Hesperia Supplement 51. Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2021, 448pp., 247 illustr. including 13 tables, 8 in colour, pbk., ISBN 9780876615539)

This book represents the sum total of many years of extensive, in-depth research by the author on the Penteskouphia *pinakes*, painted ceramic plaques that come in one-sided and two-sided varieties and offer important evidence about the craft of Corinthian potters during the sixth century BC. These small *pinakes* (averaging H. 7.2 × W. 10.0 × Th. 0.7 cm), mostly painted in the black-figure technique or occasionally using only silhouette, consist of around 1,000 examples in the form of approximately 1,200 fragments and were discovered near the village of Penteskouphia west of Corinth, in the north east Peloponnese. The artefacts were unearthed in two major batches: the first in 1879 by a farmer, and the second in

1905 in a three-day excavation carried out by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA). Since 1905, more fragments have been, and continue to be, found in small numbers. Joins across the 1879 and 1905 *pinakes* indicate that the ASCSA excavation was conducted at the same location where the 1879 *pinakes* were uncovered. The *pinakes* found in 1879 eventually made their way into the collections of the Louvre in Paris and the Antikensammlung in Berlin, while those excavated by the ASCSA in 1905 and those found since are housed in the archaeological museum at Corinth. Although the *pinakes* with images of potters, which give the book its title, are the best known, the ninety-seven instances