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*Ancestor of the West: Writing, Reasoning, and Religion in Mesopotamia, Elam, and Greece* by Jean Bottéro, Clarisse Herrenschildt, and Jean-Pierre Vernant

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*Reviewed by*

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This book offers an introduction to the meaning of writing and its impact on the societies which settled in the Middle and Near East and in Greece. As François Zabbal notes in his foreword, 'This work examines the Mesopotamian legacy; more specifically, it looks at three of the major inventions produced by the society that in the fourth millennium BC grew out of the encounter between the Sumerians and the Akkadians on the land that is today known as Iraq: writing, reasoning, and religion' [vii]. The three authors, Jean Bottéro, Clarisse Herrenschildt, and Jean-Pierre Vernant tackle the issues deriving from these inventions successively.

Bottéro [3-66] sets the scene by describing in general terms first how language and then writing developed in Mesopotamia during the fourth and third millennia BC from pictogram to syllabary and the establishment of cuneiform. In the process he discusses briefly the uses to which writing was first put. He then diverges from a history of writing to focus in two chapters on the means by which Mesopotamian peoples used myth and religion to rationalize the world in which they lived.

The central part of the book [69-146] is taken up by a much more detailed analysis by Herrenschildt of the development of forms of writing specifically in Elam, Israel and Greece. She charts the early development in Elamite Susa from pictographic *bullae* to syllabic cuneiform tablets [69-89]. She then analyses the consonant alphabets of the Near East and the subsequent development of the complete alphabet (representing consonants and vowels) by the Greeks, before turning her attention specifically to the extraordinary case of Old

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Persian cuneiform. Herrenschildt completes her essentially linguistic survey of ancient writing with a discussion of two case studies: the special place of Hebrew in the Near Eastern map of languages and scripts, and the difficulties that a full alphabet appears to have given the Athenians of the late fifth century BC.

Finally, Vernant [149–175] presents an evaluation of the development of Greek civilization, culminating in the creation of the *polis*. He describes the re-emergence of Greece from the end of the Bronze Age, noting the oral nature of Greek society as it emerges from the Dark Age, an orality that becomes literary as writing is used to record the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. But then he finds that from the sixth century, writing produces a different type of work, the thoughts of the Ionian philosophers, expressed now in prose, not in verse, and open to public debate in a way that poetic myths were not. Writing in Greece thus became the vehicle for a rationality very different from what pertained in the ancient Near East. Vernant then extends his analysis of Greek culture to examine the emergence of the political dimension in Greece, centered on the *polis*.

Notes [177–178], a bibliography [179–181], and a general index [183–92] complete the book.

Over the past thirty years or so there has been a burgeoning growth of interest in the causes of the invention of writing and in the spread of literacy, as well as in the relationship between literacy and orality on the one hand, and between literacy and cognitive growth on the other. From an anthropological point of view—a perspective which characterizes a significant approach to this topic—the works of Jack Goody may be said to be seminal, imposing on subsequent studies a strong ethnographical tendency. To instance a few of his works: they range from his edited volume *Literacy in Traditional Societies* [1968], through his *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* [1977] and *The Logic of Writing and the Organisation of Society* [1986], to the more recent *The Power of the Written Tradition* [2000].

Others have followed suit in more regionally focused investigations. In the area of ancient Greek literacy, for example, one usually starts with Eric Havelock's *Origins of Western Literacy* [1976] or more fundamentally with his *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* [1982], to which we would now add for a more nuanced approach such studies as William V. Harris, *Ancient*

*Literacy* [1989] and Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* [1989], and her *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* [1992]. These works have tended to concentrate on the uses to which writing, once invented, was put. Barry B. Powell, in his *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* [1991], controversially went back to the question of why writing was invented in protohistorical Greece, when he proposed that it was invented expressly for the purpose of preserving Homer's oral epic poetry. There are now regular conferences on the relationship between oral and literate modes of communication: the biennial Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece conferences have been running regularly since 1994 and the papers published by Brill two or three years after each.

As an introduction to this well-trodden field, how does this book stack up? Basically, it needed an editor who could pull its several strands together to produce a unity of approach. It is hard to see coherence in the whole: its three parts, while reading well in themselves, do not seem well articulated to the others. Certainly one can see how Bottéro's section opens up the door to further analysis of the development of writing, religion, and reasoning. Herrenschmidt takes up this challenge better than does Vernant, displaying both more detail in her diachronic analysis of early writing and a greater sensitivity to the linguistics of early writing than Vernant does towards the corresponding development of philosophy and politics in archaic Greece. One is left to assume, in fact, that there is some connection between what Vernant's section deals with and either of the previous two: it is not obvious to this reviewer.

This sense of puzzlement probably stems from a lack of clear direction in the opening section by Bottéro, where it is not made plain whether one is supposed to understand the three inventions (writing, reasoning, and religion) to be causally linked or to be discrete. At the most, it appears that developments in reasoning and religion are simply taken to be illustrated in the surviving written record. If this is what is meant, then it is somewhat naïve, as there is a significant body of literature dealing with the question of whether the invention of writing in itself spurred on further cognitive developments.

Jack Goody [1977] argued that writing serves two principal functions: to store information and to facilitate the process of reorganizing information. A particularly common form of preserved early

writing is the list, which permits both of the functions of storage and reorganization, and at the same time necessarily imposes a spatial arrangement of words which is left open to rearrangement. A list is a means of classification made explicit, Goody would say, by writing, ‘and possibly only by writing’ [Goody 1977, 105]. A list permits the organization, and reorganization, of information which is received at various times and places, for instance, a religious calendar of sacrifices to the gods through the year. Such a list not only provides a record of an activity at a particular time, but also establishes a more formalized way of conceiving that activity. The activity becomes ‘decontextualized’, set apart from its particular context in time and space, and instead is placed into another context in which it may gain other significances as it is juxtaposed beside other activities or other classes of events. As Goody points out, the recording in Mesopotamia of natural phenomena often took the form of lists of ‘decontextualized’ observations, which were translated into precise numerical terms, and then used to pose the questions that contributed to the development of both mathematics and astrology.

But, it may be countered, the very act of list-making is not the preserve of the literate alone. Oral societies were perfectly capable of creating lists which incorporated variable numerical values.<sup>1</sup> So, to this extent, Goody overstates his case for list-making as a peculiarly literate activity.

In another respect, however, I think he may be correct. This is in the area of the manipulation of a list’s data and the development of ideas from that very act. Goody argued for a position in which writing, and list-making in particular, provided the impetus for intellectual reflection on information. It is for him a facilitator of cognitive growth [Goody 1977, 108–111]. Geoffrey Lloyd [1979, 98, 239–240, 266] took a somewhat more circumspect stance on this issue. While acknowledging a role for literacy in the spread of critical thought in the Classical Greek world and in the development of certain types of question, Lloyd preferred to see the spoken word, rather than the written, as the principal means of communicating ideas and of scrutinizing those ideas. Ruth Finnegan [1988, 56–57, 146–147] took a similar stance, on the one hand acknowledging a role for literacy in the development of science because of the accumulation of

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<sup>1</sup> For the complexity of list poems, see Jackson 1998, 338–371.

many more written records over generations than a pre-literate individual can maintain, while on the other hand arguing that literacy in itself is not a precondition for abstract thought, and emphasizing the oral aspect of Greek literacy, i.e., written words were (normally) read aloud not silently.

Goody [1986, 78], however, reiterated his position, arguing explicitly in the case of astronomy that advances made in this field depended on reliable observations using appropriate instruments of observation, and on the preservation of those observations through writing. Sceptical scrutiny of observations and omens, he asserted [1986, 37], while not unusual in oral societies, is much easier in a written context, where it may lead to the development of 'a critical tradition that rejects "magic" side by side with a more orally based one that accepts it'; and the germs of such a critical approach, he believes, are already visible in the written records of Mesopotamia. In terms of cognitive skills, the ability to construct and then to recall a list—as poets close to pre-literate Greece did—is at a lower level than constructing, recalling, reflecting on, checking and adjusting the contents of a given list, which is what astronomers in a literate Classical Greece did.

It is this depth of understanding which seems to be missing from both Bottéro's and Vernant's essays. Again, Herrenschmidt presents a more satisfyingly academic essay, adducing ample evidence for the subtle interpretation of what writing signifies cognitively; her co-authors, in contrast, tend towards the popularist, which makes the two outer sections of the book grate with its inner core.

It may be, in fact, that what the book under review is doing is responding not to an academic debate about the various roles of literacy, or not entirely so, but to a more or less political debate about how much modern European, or just French, 'civilization' owes to Africa and the Near East as opposed to northern Europe. In the academic world, this debate has centred very much around the reception of the Sinologist Martin Bernal's work [1987–1991], in which a case (hopelessly extreme, no doubt, in its full form) was made for stating that there had been a deliberate diminution by 19th century European scholars of the role played by eastern sources in the development of ancient Greek and Roman civilization. In the political world, it has been played out through the 20th century and into the

present in Europe in various forms, often violently so. There is a hint in Vernant's opening paragraph that this may be the real focus of this book, when he talks of 'a former government minister, reflecting on the true sources common to all of Europe, [who] thinks he can locate them in the primitive culture of the Indo-Europeans'. These 'Indo-Europeans' are then placed by the minister, in terms of their origin, on 'the banks of the Baltic Sea' [149]. This is the view that Vernant seeks explicitly to argue against, in conformity with the book's overall focus on Mesopotamia as the principal source for modern Western civilization. The issue seems also to underlie Botéro's essay. Herrenschildt's chapters are free of this undercurrent, although her section on modern Hebrew may be seen as a response to it. If this is the case, then it may explain the lack of a clear, overall unity that the reviewer finds in the work. The book is then fundamentally not so much about writing, reasoning, and religion as perhaps about France's angst about its cultural origins. The original French title of the work—*L'Orient ancien et nous*—may after all have been more accurately descriptive of the book's focus.

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