

ARCHAEOLOGY AND TEXTS

John Bennet

The discovery and decipherment of ancient texts has fascinated scholars for many years (see Pope 1975). The reason for this lies in a text's peculiar status as a material object which carries certain explicit, decodable symbolic information. Although it is true of all material objects recovered by archaeology that they carry a symbolic meaning, however mundane, a text is perhaps unique in conveying a meaning explicitly by means of language. Admittedly, there are problems first of decipherment and, even then, of interpretation, but the text's unique value lies in its ability to 'speak'.

With this important characteristic in mind, contributions were solicited from several parts of the world, the aims being to illustrate the following:

1. The number of different regions of the world where textual information for past societies is available.
2. Some of the different ways in which textual information can be

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Clearly, in a single volume, the achievement of the first aim is impossible, and the coverage, though wide, is far from exhaustive and to some extent depends on the theme editor's own contacts. It should be pointed out, though, that areas where more recent, explicitly historical data are available in texts were excluded, as it was felt that a somewhat different set of approaches was required for such texts. The wide geographical spread of articles included will be obvious from a glance at the contents page.

The second aim has been fulfilled to a large extent. The articles presented here fall broadly into three categories, and are arranged accordingly within the volume. The first two papers, by Postgate and Kemp, discuss the two areas 'where it all began', both in terms of writing itself and our study of ancient texts: Mesopotamia and Egypt. The two articles argue for the special importance of the large amounts of textual data available in the ancient Near East; where they differ is in their level of integration. Postgate sees texts, and the use of writing generally, as an important social phenomenon to be linked to the archaeological data, while Kemp believes that the referents of archaeology and texts are complementary, but largely irreconcilable.

The second group (Chakrabarti and Barnes) explores a different avenue: that of using non-contemporaneous records to help interpret archaeological data. Chakrabarti addresses the broad, and far from simple, question of relating the Indian literary data to the complex

pre- and proto-historic archaeological data for the subcontinent. He is therefore at two removes, as it were: the first chronological, and the second in the type of textual data employed. Secondly, Barnes examines the ways in which linguistic data contained in AD 7th-8th century Japanese texts can be used to argue for a specific settlement type in earlier periods. The point she stresses is a methodological one: that such linguistic data must be used carefully, and their linguistic context understood before they can be considered against the archaeological data. There is no simple one-to-one relationship.

The third group (Marcus, Bennet, and Palaima and Shelmerdine) examines situations where textual evidence of any kind is not extensive and therefore requires careful analysis and control. Marcus discusses several approaches to the study of territorial boundaries in Mesoamerica, all of which involve the analysis of textual material, but in the context of a much wider 'jig-saw' of different types of evidence. The article illustrates well how the careful fitting together of such a 'jig-saw' can produce important results, and suggest further ways of acquiring and testing evidence. Bennet examines the theoretical basis for the employment of textual data in the Aegean, arguing that a careful examination of texts both in their own context as records, and in their archaeological context is the only secure way to derive the maximum amount of information from such limited textual resources. Finally, the potential of such integration in the Aegean region is illustrated by Palaima and Shelmerdine, using the specific example of administrative organisation as it relates to industrial production in the regional centre of Pylos in Southwestern Greece.

The thematic section is closed with an article which examines the use of ancient author's reports as near-contemporaneous ethnographic documents (Júdice Gamito), thus contributing a fourth perspective on texts. She takes the example of Southwest Iberia and the references in Herodotus to Tartessos. Although a specific case, it raises more general archaeological questions involved in the identification of ancient culture areas by archaeological means.

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Reference

Pope, M. 1975. The Story of Decipherment from Egyptian Hieroglyphic to Linear B. London, Thames and Hudson.