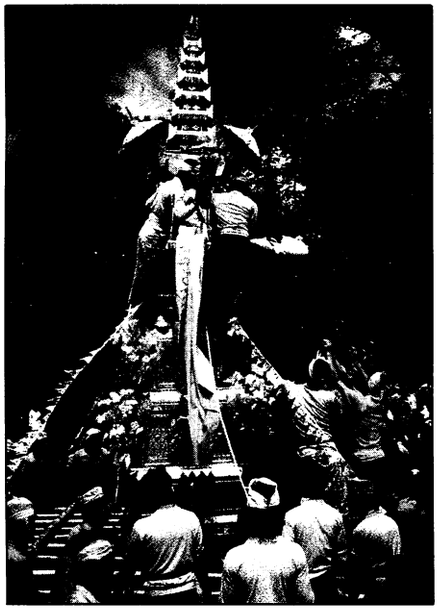
"Rangda the witch, Queen of the sorcerers." [From *Balinese Worlds*]



"Cremation tower arriving at the cremation grounds. The family pemangku, riding his father's tower, is fainting from the excitement." [From *Balinese Worlds*]

vergence of people's ideas. Thus, the accepted hierarchy of texts and text-experts in the Muslim village yields a greater degree of convergence of ideas than does the decentralized array of texts and experts in the Hindu village. From each such tradition, actors and groups with differing interests and experiences select suitable bits of society and culture for themselves.

This component by itself suggests small groups (or individuals) spinning farther and farther away from each other, whereas we do, through it all, see a great deal of continuity in Balinese life. How does this happen? The question is an old one—with it Talcott Parsons began his norm-minded reshaping of American social science in the late 1930s. Barth's answer is different: in the living of their everyday lives, people develop some general, and widely shared, concerns. By "concerns" Barth means the precepts that Balinese carry through life, such as fearing error, managing one's feelings, and remaining humble. (Barth's approach resembles that of Pierre Bourdieu in this respect.) Concerns lead people to act in ways that are erroneously viewed by pattern-minded anthropologists as "culture." For example, fearing error leads people to act gaily so as to cover up nervousness in social encounters; observers have misinterpreted this gaiety as all there is to Balinese emotions and personhood, rather than as a cover for strong below-surface emotions.

This view of human action and culture provides the base for Barth to reconstruct long-standing ideas of what Balinese are like. Successive chapters offer new interpretations of politics, kingship, caste, and sorcery, each based on an analysis of social interactions and key Balinese concerns. Political life, once interpreted in terms of a stipulated harmony among village institutions, is now seen as rife with a factionalism born of concerns for self-protection; caste, generally viewed in pan-Indic religious terms, is seen as functionally linked to kingship. Several enjoyable cases illuminate Barth's view. The story of an elopement and marriage underscores how people construct diverging interpretations of events, but also how they hook those interpretations to a set of shared starting points: Islamic law, the concept of a vow, ideas about eloping.

These constant points of reference keep divergent interpretations from spinning out of control, but they also call into question the terms of Barth's frontal attack on past Bali studies. The "concerns" that begin his explanatory sequence themselves rest on shared beliefs, as his own data inform us. The concern to keep negative feelings under strict control, for example, stems from the belief, apparently shared by all Balinese, that letting such feelings rule make one susceptible to sorcery. Shared beliefs must, therefore, be basic to explanations of social life, not epiphenomenal. That said, one can still accept both the empirical critique of Bali-studies assumptions and the view, strongly supported here through case studies and brief descriptions of a number of villages, that Balinese create diversity as much as they reproduce traditions.

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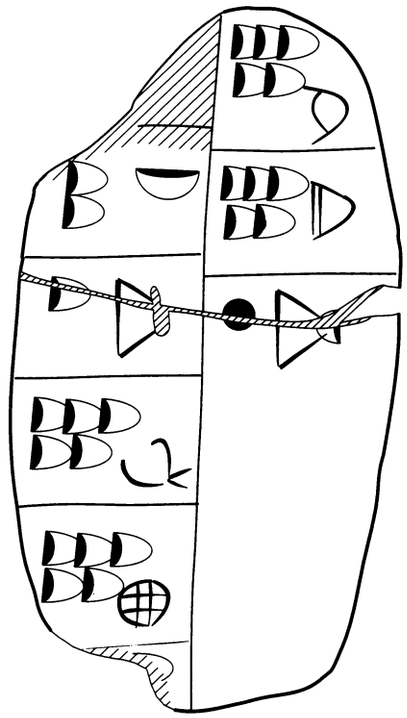
Early Literacy

Archaic Bookkeeping. Early Writing and Techniques of Economic Administration in the Ancient Near East. HANS J. NISSEN, PETER DAMEROW, and ROBERT K. ENGLUND. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994. xii, 169 pp., illus. $34.95 or £27.95. Translated from the German edition (1990) by Paul Larsen.

Writing in his immensely popular *Nineveh and Its Remains*, first published in 1849, Sir Henry Austin Layard, archeologist, adventurer, and diplomat, remarked: "With regard to the relative antiquity of the several forms of cuneiform writing, it may be asserted, with some degree of confidence, that the most ancient hitherto discovered is the Assyrian." Layard could not imagine that this script could be any older than the first millennium B.C. His own successes, including his discovery of



"Tablet with nine entries: from one to ten units of different grain products." [From *Archaic Bookkeeping*]

the vast libraries of King Assurbanipal of Assyria in the capital city of Nineveh, led not only to the decipherment of cuneiform but also to the massive archeological plundering of the Near East. Only a few decades later, the Western world had before it a fairly secure picture of a series of literate ancient civilizations that antedated even the Flood, which was so important to the Victorian imagination. In the 1920s, archeologists digging in the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk came across some very early tablets that could not be read but clearly seemed to exemplify the earliest stages of cuneiform; over the years they managed to excavate almost 5000 archaic tablets and fragments. We now know that the earliest of these texts were written sometime around 3100 B.C.

Most of these finds remained unpublished, and similar texts from other sites were made available in inadequate editions. To remedy this situation, a Berlin archeologist, Hans Nissen, initiated a project to analyze and publish all the archaic tablets from Uruk and elsewhere. The first scholarly volumes have begun to appear, and the book under review provides an important summary of the quarter-century of research by the Berlin team.

The book began life as a German catalog for an exhibition of archaic tablets, of unknown origin, that had been purchased from the Erlenmeyer family. In addition to a list of objects exhibited and related discussions, it contained marvelous color photographs of the tablets. The English edition consists of all the essays written by the Berlin scholars, without the catalog. The photographs it contains, which appear in black and white, have been selected to illustrate the discussion of specific topics.

The archaic texts were inscribed with a reed stylus on clay tablets. Initially there were about 1200 separate signs, but as time went on the repertoire of symbols was altered and eventually reduced, so that by the first millennium there were just over 300 characters, although in letters and administrative documents one would utilize just over 100 signs. The later cuneiform consisted of syllables, word signs, and classifiers that specified the semantic class of a word. The earliest texts, however, are quite different. Although we cannot fluently "read" the archaic tablets, the work of the Berlin team has made it possible to understand much of their content. Most important, their clarification of the very structure of the writing system has led to a new understanding of the origins of Western writing. It seems that the Uruk tablets do not always represent discrete parts of speech in graphic form. In fact, it is doubtful if the earliest of these texts can be linked to any specific language. Although many scholars have assumed that the underlying language was Sumerian, the authors of *Archaic Bookkeeping* are reluctant to accept that conclusion and—rightly, I believe—claim that the writing is not strictly linguistic. In order to read an archaic text, one must analyze a variety of different vehicles for expressing meaning: the shape of a tablet, the arrangement of the inscribed symbols, and the numerical system used. The latter is particularly important; indeed, the elucidation of archaic mathematics is one of the breakthrough achievements of the Berlin team.

The archaic texts made use of five major notational systems as well as several derived ones. Each of these was used for different purposes; one derived system "was apparently used exclusively for the recording of slaughtered or perished cattle of the current accounting year or for denoting a specific type of produced or distributed beer." Others were used exclusively for grain products or for land measures. Number signs are themselves indexes of commodities as well as of arithmetical values. All of this is explained in the book with admirable clarity. Because the authors are well versed in later cuneiform and in the social and economic history of Mesopotamia, they are able to explain the similarities and differences between the earliest accounting practices and the later developments of Sumerian writing, all in a manner that speaks to specialists and nonspecialists alike.

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Neo-Sumerian account concerning the labor performance of male workers in an agricultural plant. The original tablet measures 16.3 by 16.8 centimeters. [From *Frühe Schrift und Techniken der Wirtschaftsverwaltung im alten Vorderen Orient*, the catalog accompanying an exhibition of Near Eastern proto-cuneiform tablets and other objects dating to the same period held in Berlin's Charlottenburg Palace in the summer of 1990; courtesy Freie Universität Berlin, photograph by Margret Nissen]