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Part I: Agency in the Formation of Early Writing and Notational Systems

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Individual Intentionality, Social Structure, and Material Agency in Early Writing and Emerging Script Technologies

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A search for "agency" and "archaeology" in virtually any academic database will yield a vast number of books, articles, and reviews, written for the most part in the past twenty years. If, however, one adds the search term "text" or "writing," the number of hits diminishes dramatically, and if references to modern texts and writing are removed, the result is virtually nil. Such searches measure very crudely what we archaeologists already know: agency and text have not to date been archaeological concerns (cf. Yoffee 2005, 113–30). Why should this be? After all, reading and interpreting ancient texts are an important aspect of doing archaeology in many chronological periods in both the New and Old Worlds. Indeed, it could be argued that ancient writing should have *increased* in prominence with the popularity of agency approaches in archaeology; after all, individual agents are frequently evident in early writing systems in a way that they are not in the archaeological record. Early texts are full of people with names doing specific things in particular places and times. These textually attested actors seem to have agency, if we use the generally accepted definition of agency as the capacity to make a difference through action (Giddens 1984, 14). This is precisely the problem, however—identifying individuals and their actions alone does not constitute the study of agency. The view that social life is

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the aggregation of the intentional and rational decisions of historical actors is one that agency approaches of nearly every stripe seek to abolish and overcome.

As the chapters in this volume amply demonstrate, however, the study of agency in early writing is much more than cataloging political and military events from annalistic accounts and describing the transformative power of early rulers. They show that the analysis of early writing can make an important contribution to agency in archaeology. Not only do ancient texts and other communicative technologies provide evidence that allows us to access multiple aspects of agency in antiquity, but the objects and the communication systems that they reflect can be analyzed in terms of agency approaches. That is, texts can tell us both the *what* and the *how* of agency (cf. Malafouris 2011). They cannot do so alone, however, and this is an important thread shared by the chapters in this book. Ancient texts, like certain types of archaeological finds (Hodder 2000, 26), may occasionally include detailed and vivid information about particular historical events and actors, but without understanding the wider social, historical, and material context of the text and what it describes, it is difficult to advance beyond description and guesswork. The study of ancient writing and texts through the theoretical lens of agency approaches forces the analyst to attend to the complex of relationships among historical actors (both those described in the text and those who produced it), social structures, and material culture to produce detailed and compelling analyses.

Writing is therefore far from a "magic bullet" that can solve the theoretical, methodological, or evidentiary problems associated with agency approaches to ancient societies. It is (or should be), however, an important part of agency in archaeology. In this chapter, we will explain and justify this bald assertion through discussions of what it means to study agency in archaeology and why texts are particularly useful for this task, and finally how and why agency approaches can meaningfully contribute to epigraphical interpretation and the synthesis of epigraphic and archaeological data.

AGENCIES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

In the past few decades, the notion of agency has increasingly entered the lexicon of anthropological archaeology. Over this time it has become absorbed and integrated into the mainstream of archaeological discourse, and it seems here to stay (Robb 2010). Almost from the beginning of agency's use in archaeological literature, there have been as many ideas about what constitutes agency as authors who have treated the topic (Dobres and Robb 2000, 9; Dornan 2002; Robb 2001). Disparate applications of "agency" have been employed in analyses of the material record to address issues ranging from individual intentionality (Hodder 2000), personhood and identity (Gardner 2007; Gillespie 2001; Meskell 2001), historical motivations and political strategies of social actors,

artistic and material style and technological production (Dietler and Herbich 1998; Dobres 2000; Gell 1998; see also the papers in Hill and Gunn 1977), sociopolitical evolution (Blanton et al. 1996), practical rationality, political resistance, and the (sometimes) unintended consequences of social struggle or cultural contact (Barrett 2000, 62, 65; Pauketat 2000, 2001; Silliman 2001) to the interplay among structure, event, individual practice, and historical process (Gardner 2007; Robb 2007, 2010). A number of post-processual authors have used agency in an attempt to counter neo-evolutionary and structural-functionalist deterministic models of human action (e.g., Kristiansen 2004; Meskell 1999; Shanks and Tilley 1987; see also Ashmore, Wooffitt, and Harding 1994; Johnson 1989).

Agency has thus variously been equated with individual social actors and their unique cognitive structures, free-willed resistance to social norms or power inequalities, and the capacity for adept social practice free of sociocultural and structural constraints, rooted in rational intentional action, conscious practice, unconscious dispositions, or subjective experience (Dornan 2002, 304, Knapp and van Dommelen 2008; cf. Barrett 2000; Moore 2000; Thomas 2004). Although some see a strong connection between agents and individuals identifiable in the archaeological record (Knapp and van Dommelen 2008; see also the contributions to this volume by Englehardt, Nakassis, and Wang Haicheng), others warn of conflating agency and actors (e.g., Barrett 2000, 2001; Moore 2000, 260).

In light of the diversity of the notional terrain of the term "agency" and its variable manifestations, and because of the breadth of its theoretical and practical applications, it has become increasingly difficult to adequately define the construct, evaluate its methodological and analytic strengths and weaknesses, or address the question of who, or what, has agency (Ashmore, Wooffitt, and Harding 1994, 734; Dobres and Robb 2005; Silliman 2001, 191–92). Ortner (1984, 127; 2001; 2006) suggests that the concept of agentive practice is neither a theory nor a method in itself but rather the symbol of an emerging theoretical orientation under whose aegis a variety of theories and methods have flourished. Likewise, Dobres and Robb (2000, 2005) argue that there has been little archaeological consideration of the fundamental epistemological and methodological issues associated with the agency concept and its variable uses (see also Kristiansen 2004; Thomas 2000, 2004). Dobres and Robb count well over twenty distinct definitions of the agency concept in a review of the then-recent literature on the topic. In such a situation, they argue, the term has become "an ambiguous platitude meaning everything and nothing" (Dobres and Robb 2000, 3). Moore's conclusion to the Dobres and Robb volume offers a similar assessment, suggesting that terms such as "agency" are used as a kind of "disciplinary shorthand" that indicates areas of human life, capacity, and relations to which investigators refer in their analyses (Moore 2000, 262). Kristiansen

(2004, 84) takes this criticism a step further, asserting that employing the agency concept signals little more than theoretical affiliation, and that a certain "conceptual sloganism" dominates recent discussion of the topic.

Despite such confusion, agency continues to attract archaeologists precisely because it allows investigators, albeit in a variety of ways, to overcome two divisions fundamental to social inquiry: one between agents and structures and another between human subjects and material objects. Agency is an open concept that can be employed in different theoretical contexts for different interpretive goals, and therein lie both its danger and its attraction. Yet within the disparate and sometimes contradictory definitions and utilizations of agency, several central issues and common themes emerge (cf. Robb 2010).

Archaeological applications of agency often owe much to the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990a) and Anthony Giddens's structuration (1979, 1984). Such approaches share the fundamental assumption that humans are not uniform automatons and their behavior cannot be described adequately by simple rules of conduct. Instead, social structure and individual action come together in daily practice and constitute a duality in which each presupposes the other. Social agents can at times be goal-oriented individuals who act purposefully, rationally, and strategically to advance their own interests (Dornan 2002, 304; Silliman 2001, 191–92; cf. Barrett 2000; Hodder 2000), but all social action occurs in sociohistorical circumstances not entirely of an agent's own creation (Johnson 1989; Pauketat 2000; Silliman 2001). As Robb (2007, 21) has evocatively put it, "we wind up like Gulliver, tied down by the Lilliputians by a hundred thin threads," most of which we do not see. Because all action is conditioned and made possible by social structures, most actions are not consciously decided upon: internalized structures eliminate the unthinkable, allowing agents to pick courses of action instinctively in most situations (Bourdieu 1990a, 53–54; Giddens 1979, 57). As Giddens (1984, 5–6) points out, agents nevertheless maintain a theoretical understanding of their own behavior and that of others and can provide explanations when asked. In most situations, however, there is no need to pose questions and this practical consciousness remains largely non-discursive. Individual action is thus contextualized within structures that are at once created through agentive practice and themselves provide identity and meaning to the practices of social actors (Knapp and van Dommelen 2008, 23; Meskell 1999, 31; Silliman 2001, 192). In the complex triangle of relationships among individual intentions and motivations, structural constraints, and the unintended outcomes of their actions, humans direct their activities consciously, unconsciously, and practically (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 10–37; Dobres and Robb 2000, 10; Knapp and van Dommelen 2008, 21; Ortner 2001; Silliman 2001, 192; cf. Gardner 2004, 3–6; Thomas 2004, 121).

"Material agency," an approach that is largely inspired by actor-network theory (ANT) (reviewed by Latour 2005) and Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*

(1998), has become an important development in the archaeological literature (Knappett and Malafouris 2008). Whereas most theorists consider only humans to be agents because humans alone have the capacity to "act otherwise" (Giddens 1984, 14), material agency defines agency as the capacity to make a difference. It is therefore a property of humans and things alike. Thus, as Giddens and Bourdieu attack the dualism of agent and structure, material agency attacks the dualism of active human subject and passive material object. The advantage of this approach for archaeologists is obvious: it transforms material culture from a passive record of the "real" object of social inquiry (agents and their interactions) to an active participant in, and an important influence on, the social.

Recent debate surrounding the concept of agency in archaeology thus focuses on a number of issues: fixing the unit of analysis on structure or the individual, the role of individuals in structural transformation, the material signifiers that reflect the social affiliations and cultural institutions behind agentive practice, intentions versus consequences of human action, the consciousness and rationality of individual action, the connections between agency and power, the need to historically contextualize agency to establish meaning and direction in archaeological interpretation, and the adscription of action, goals, and power to nonhuman or material agents (Barrett 2001; Dornan 2002, 314–20; Gardner 2004; Knapp and van Dommelen 2008; Knappett 2008; Kristiansen 2004; Olsen 2003; Pauketat 2001; Thomas 2004; van der Leeuw 2008; Walker and Lucero 2000; Yarrow 2008). This volume does not pretend to offer definitive answers to the fundamental questions surrounding agency and its use in anthropological archaeology. Nor does it profess the preeminence or utility of any one particular conception of agency. The chapters in this volume do not take a unified approach to agency theories; they do not share the same theoretical influences and are not equally explicit about their theoretical framework. They do agree, however, that a dialectical relationship between society and individual, and between subject and object, is crucial for achieving a fuller understanding of the complexities of social life. In this sense, this volume responds to Robb's (2010, 515) exhortation to practice an archaeology *with* agency rather than an archaeology *of* agency.

INSCRIBING AGENCY

Agency approaches share an emphasis on daily practice. The quotidian nature of much of the archaeological record makes it compatible with the emphasis on routine practice among agency theorists, as Robb's (2007) recent study amply shows. Even in the most urban and literate of ancient societies, however, the ability to read and write was rare (see, e.g., Harris 1989). Why early writing and agency, then? In this section, we argue that despite their frequent association with elites, writing and texts provide important insights into the constitution of

social practice in ancient societies. We also suggest that because writing belongs to both the material and documentary record, it allows investigators to address the concept(s) of agency from multiple and overlapping perspectives.

First, the textual record of epigraphy offers a unique line of evidence that complements the data available through the archaeological record—texts and archaeology often provide vastly different views of the same time period or historical incident (Kristiansen 2004, 85; see also Chase, Chase, and Cobos 2008, 12, 15). Particular social actors are not always clearly visible in the material record. Texts, on the other hand, are often more able to provide a window into those dimensions of past agents that may not be identifiable archaeologically. A good example is the wealth of information about political leaders provided by the decipherment of the Mayan script (e.g., Martin and Grube 2000). Although it is often the case, as with the Maya, that surviving inscriptions are monumental products of royal history or propaganda and the individuals revealed in them are, consequently, elites and their inner circle, administrative documents such as cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia can also shed light on a wider range of people who may constitute a significant cross section of the population at large. Texts may therefore elucidate historical actors and their activities, allowing for an analysis of their motives and meanings.

As discussed above, motives and meanings of human action are hardly sufficient to produce a cogent discussion of agency, although neither are they irrelevant to this project. Fortunately, epigraphy also provides information about social structures that produce and are produced by the activities of agents. If we follow Sewell (1992) in asserting that social structures are composed of a duality of virtual schemas and actual resources, each of which produces and is produced by the other, then the inherently material nature of social structure (the resources) means that theoretically they are observable archaeologically. In practice, however, it is often the case that structures are more easily studied textually. Language is an obvious example, but the study of structures that are particularly resource-heavy, such as political institutions, is also dependent on documentary evidence. Textual studies are therefore crucial to the study of both sides of the agency/structure duality. Public inscriptions and administrative documents alike shed light on the identity, actions, and intentions of individual historical actors. At the same time, these documents provide evidence for the schemas of "hard" institutional structures that at once enable and constrain these same actors.

Connected to the issue of identifying agents in the textual record is the debate about the concept of the individual and to what extent it is a projection of modern Western notions, an issue discussed recently by Knapp and van Dommelen (2008). Texts constitute an invaluable source of evidence regarding ancient emic categories of personhood. For example, Lynn Meskell's detailed exploration of Egyptian notions of selfhood and identity, which constitutes an

important challenge to the projection of Western individualism into the past, is grounded in large part in the documentary evidence (Meskell 1999, 2002; Meskell and Joyce 2003). This evidence needs to be treated carefully, of course, because texts are never simple expressions of what constitutes personhood. Indeed, the texts that bear on these issues are usually complex in literary, religious, and ideological terms, and even basic readings and interpretations may be debated. Consequently, the textual material needs to be analyzed in its own right alongside the archaeological record; it virtually never can be considered a straightforward testimony or passive background against which the material remains can be compared. As Meskell's studies show, however, the potential gains of using textual and material data in combination to study past notions of the self are great. In our view, studies that incorporate analyses of textual material are, and should be, leading the way in the study of how personhood is constructed in particular historical contexts.

Texts themselves are also material artifacts (Basso 1989; Houston 2004a; Robertson 2004), and as such they are conducive to a practice-based analysis of their production. Epigraphers and palaeographers have for years paid close attention to the processes of writing. Not only can individual writers be identified—sometimes they name themselves, sometimes writing habits can allow scribal hands to be distinguished from each other—but the process of the inscribing can be traced and explicated in exacting detail. Archaeologists can describe production practices as they unfolded in space and time with inscriptions perhaps more than in any other field of archaeological investigation. For instance, the detailed study of clay tablets from Late Bronze Age ("Mycenaean") Greece allows us now to identify the tablets formed by particular individuals (based on preserved palm prints) and written by a given scribe (based on handwriting) to determine the choices, conscious and unconscious, that the scribe made in formatting and language when he was confronted with a complex array of information and significant constraints of time and medium; to associate particular texts with others from the same set; and to situate this activity spatially and temporally (Palaima 2011). All of this allows for a very thick description indeed, and this fine-grained detail, when placed alongside our broader understanding of scribal practice in the Mycenaean world, offers the possibility for convincing and empirically grounded discussions of agency and production. Such analyses are far from trivial, because from an agency approach social practices *are* historical processes, not merely their consequences (Pauketat 2001, 74). In the course of writing a document, an individual necessarily makes use of a wide variety of structures—linguistic, of course, but also administrative, economic, ideological, and so on—that may be reproduced or changed while instantiated in the process of textual production. The result is that detailed studies such as those made possible by early writing provide important insights into social structures and macro-historical processes.

Interest in texts extends beyond the processes of their production and into their consumption. Texts often possess voices that imbue the inscription with agency. Svenbro (1993) has noted that Archaic Greek inscriptions prior to 540 BCE tend to "speak" in the first person—for instance, "I am the funerary monument of Glaukos"—and argues that this is highly significant in a culture in which most (if not all) individuals would have read aloud (see Carrasco, this volume). This significance is illustrated nicely by a Greek myth in which a young man named Acontius tricks a girl named Cydippe by rolling into her path an apple inscribed with the words "I swear by Artemis to marry Acontius"; Cydippe read the text aloud and the goddess held her to the vow. Inscriptions can therefore impose their will upon readers, forcing them to lend their voices to the text, or not to read at all, neatly reversing our "commonsense" expectation of an active human subject and a passive material object. Texts may be inscribed on plain stones, but it is also the case that inscriptions include iconographical elements (like Greek or Maya stelae) or are written upon artifacts like vessels or statues. As such, the objects on which early writing and texts are found are ostensibly archaeological entities, although this is downplayed in some scholarly traditions that emphasize the textuality of an inscription at the expense of its materiality. The material agency of the inscription should be understood as a complex of interaction between material and text, as well as its context in space and time. The status of inscriptions as both material artifact and text allows us to explore multiple and overlapping aspects of their social agency, sometimes at a greater level of detail than is usually possible in purely archaeological contexts.

THE PRACTICE OF WRITING

If writing has much to contribute to the study of agency in archaeology, it is equally true that agency approaches have an important role to play in the study of ancient writing. Agency theories provide a useful frame to understand the very emergence of writing, which is a poorly understood phenomenon in many cultural contexts. Whereas the development of a given script is sometimes seen as the intentional invention of a single historical individual (see, e.g., Powell 1991, 2002), agency approaches urge us to see script development in a broader array of practices and structures, including iconography and semasiography (defined as writing with signs that are not linked to speech; see Robertson 2004). That is, agency moves the focus away from intentionality and event and toward practices and processes. At the same time, it allows us to negotiate the twin poles of event and process that remain so important to the study of early writing (Houston 2004a). Indeed, agency encourages us to see writing not as an artifact that once invented remains stable but as an ongoing process—a structure that is both the medium and outcome of individual episodes of writing and reading.

More generally, we argue that agency provides a useful framework for the integration of material and textual evidence. This issue is a problematic one in virtually every region where these two types of evidence can be mobilized (e.g., Bell 1987; Bennet 1988; Chase, Chase, and Cobos 2008, Houston 1989, 2000; but see Houston 1993 or the papers collected in Culbert 1991 for examples of effective conjunctive approaches). The problem tends to be that archaeology and text do not seem to talk to each other in straightforward ways. If, however, the discussion is reframed around the notion that agency and structure come together and are indistinguishable in practice, then archaeological and textual data can be combined in new and productive ways. We offer as proof of this assertion the rich array of approaches and results in the contributions to this volume.

GOALS AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

The careful reader will notice that we have studiously avoided providing a "working definition" of agency or the agency concept. In light of the multiplicity of definitions offered previously (see above; Dobres and Robb 2000, 3), this would be an exercise in futility. Providing a single definition of this abstract idea that will evolve through the chapters in this volume is not our goal. Rather, the collective goal of this volume is the dialogue—a dialogue that, through an interdisciplinary collaboration among art historians, epigraphers, prehistorians, and classical, historical, and anthropological archaeologists, assists in developing the concept of agency in archaeological practice (see Robb 2010). Because this dialogue has no fixed end point, we offer no specific concluding chapter that neatly and concisely sums up any definitive conclusions or inferences that may be drawn from the chapters as a collective whole or that puts a final point on the volume. Rather, we synthesize the individual contributions in this introduction and offer a brief epilogue that suggests some ways in which the dialogue may be continued.

This volume grew out of a session held in Atlanta at the Seventy-fourth Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in April 2009. Papers were presented by Bestock, Carrasco, Englehardt, Nakassis, Smith, and Wang Haicheng, all of which appear here in expanded form. The chapters by Jackson, Reichel, Anderson, and Johnson and Johnson were prepared especially for this volume. Jennifer Dornan and Ruth Whitehouse kindly agreed to provide a foreword and epilogue, respectively.

The fundamental goals of this volume reflect the primary aim of the symposium: to illustrate how a text-based perspective can clarify some of the problems and possibilities of using the concept of agency in archaeology. We seek to demonstrate that a focus on early writing and texts is both an appropriate and a necessary place to ask about agency in the past. As detailed above, the epigraphic record provides a different type of evidence, one that provides certain windows

into individuals and/or agency, which radically differs from but also complements the archaeological record. Examining writing systems and early texts through the lens of the agency concept also has the potential to illuminate precisely those questions of individual intentions, consequences, meanings, and motivations inherent in cultural production, allowing for the identification and discussion of observable actors in the archaeological record. Such queries all too often elude adequate explanation solely on the basis of material remains encountered in the archaeological record. The interdisciplinary, text-based perspectives offered in this volume thus seek to increase our understanding and aid archaeological interpretation of the historically particular subjectivities of past social actors.

The contributors to this volume approach the subjects and issues implicit in the above discussion of agency in a variety of ways, reflecting the diverse approaches current in archaeological, art historical, and, indeed, sociological applications. Nonetheless, common themes do emerge, and the contributions have been arranged in three sections. The first section, including the chapters by Jackson, Reichel, Smith, and Bestock, deals with agentive processes implicated in the formation of early writing and notational systems. These chapters explore the role of individuals in the development of scripts, as well as the contextual factors and cognitive aspects involved in the construction of meaning in emerging writing systems. The second section, comprising the chapters by Anderson, Carrasco, and Johnson and Johnson, explores agency from a more explicitly materialist perspective. These chapters examine the agency *of* early writing, addressing the agentive roles played by texts and the materiality of the written sign. In doing so, they seek to elucidate the relationship between the text as material object and its interpretation by the reading audience. The third and final section, encompassing the contributions of Englehardt, Wang Haicheng, and Nakassis, approaches questions of agency from a structural perspective. As such, these chapters examine agency as deduced *from* or *through* writing and early texts. Somewhat more historical in their approach, these authors explore the relationship between agency and structure in the interplay of epigraphic, historical, and archaeological evidence in addressing issues of how cultural structures and institutions both contextualize and are affected by the actions of individual agents as reflected in textual evidence.

Because of their temporal and spatial breadth, and the fact that each chapter explores a distinct script tradition, the contributions to this volume relate agency to the study of writing systems and its relationship to the archaeological record in different ways. As such, chapters and sections at once stand alone and complement each other. Although they may not flow seamlessly into one another, individual chapters should be seen as distinct voices in a dialogue, located at a variety of points along the continuum of current perspectives about agency and structure, from individual strategic action and motivation to the

structural institutions that both constrain and enable such action. Of course, all chapters explore some of the issues that are inherent in all considerations of agency, including individual intentionality, rational action and strategic motivations, the materiality of objects, cultural production and consumption, and the constraining and enabling effects of structure. Thus, it is rather more fruitful to conceive of this volume as an ongoing discussion among its participants. Each contributor offers a variation on the overall theme and incorporates different types of evidence and theoretical approaches to provide a unique perspective in the dialogue surrounding agency, epigraphy, and the utility of both in archaeological investigation.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS VOLUME

Margaret Jackson begins the discussion in chapter 1 by exploring questions of agency in the nebulous intersection of semasiography and "true writing" (as a graphic representation of spoken language) in various script traditions of the New World. She posits that agency is the common thread that unites particular signs within variable applications and allows for the construction of meaning in the transition between nonphonetic (i.e., pictographic, ideographic, or iconographic) and phonetically structured conventions of visual representation. Jackson suggests that the dichotomy between text and image is sterile and that, ultimately, semasiographic notations coexist with phonetic signs within early (and modern) scripts, serving a mediatory function that allows for the construction of new and sometimes variable meanings by an individual reader. Thus, Jackson emphasizes the crucial role of ancient human agents in making sense of visual signs. Implicit in her analysis is an exploration of the contextual use relationship between the object and human agent, which reveals the necessity of studying the materiality of ancient texts in their physical and social contexts. Jackson's discussion sets the stage for the chapters that follow insofar as she addresses issues of structural and situational context, the materiality of object, its presence and performance, and the individual construction and interpretation of meaning from ancient texts. Jackson's ideas regarding the context in which visual messages operate could quite easily be related to archaeological indicators present in the material record (such as the fineware ceramics she discusses in conjunction with Moche visual culture) or ethnohistoric evidence, for that matter. Ultimately, the concepts of place, agency, and vehicle that Jackson suggests are central to the derivation of meaning in early texts provide a useful paradigm for interpretation of seemingly disjointed traditions of visual representation in the Americas.

In chapter 2, Clemens Reichel explores incipient Mesopotamian scripts in the Neolithic period. Reichel suggests that the emergence of Mesopotamian writing was inexorably linked to the growing needs of increasingly complex

economic and administrative systems. Through an exploration of the agency of record-keeping in terms of the development of both early Mesopotamian script and states, he argues that writing in ancient Near Eastern contexts was a technological rather than conceptual innovation. Reichel creates a strong link between agents and the archaeological record by connecting writing with the specific actions of identifiable social actors, as well as sociocultural processes identifiable in the material record, such as stratification, economic specialization, and increasing sociopolitical, technological, and urban complexity. Stress factors related to political and economic development, coupled with the nature of accountable commodities in early Mesopotamian society, necessitated the establishment of a recording system that was able to track bulk, volume, and space, as well as specific numbers of particular countable items, to exert administrative control. The distinct yet overlapping record-keeping systems that developed to address the challenges involved in accounting for various factors of specific commodities coexisted for millennia prior to the emergence of true writing at the nodal point of seals, sealings, and texts. Writing emerged, Reichel argues, as the result of a synthesis of both recording systems and their associated procedures, largely to meet the expanding need to identify accountable administrative authority—be that authority an individual social actor or the bureaucratic office behind him. To some, Reichel's contribution may read like a more "conventional" textual analysis, in suggesting that the development of record-keeping, seals, and (eventually) written texts was necessary to support a complex bureaucracy. However, he moves beyond traditional analyses by suggesting that individual record-keepers were unwittingly complicit in enabling the particular social and economic structures that ultimately led to the formation of the earliest scripts. In this sense, Reichel illustrates the role of individual social actors (albeit nameless and practically unidentifiable) in the development of early writing and notational systems.

Like Reichel, Adam Smith sees the invention of writing as an agentive process in the structurationist or historical sense. That is, writing is not the result of a great master scribe but rather the cumulative effect of writing-like practices that span large geographical and chronological spaces. Scripts emerge primarily as a result of the unintended consequences of agentive practices over time. In chapter 3, Smith argues against direct individual control or intentionality in the development of Chinese writing. He asserts that writing develops not from prescient design by scribes who envision the benefits of literacy but rather from extant practices of sign use or the manipulation of visual images when such practices undergo a process of "repetitious intensification." Agency exists in this scenario in material terms, insofar as the intensified replication of certain signs with "object-like" visual features leads users to an unconscious selection for a repertoire of signs with increasingly "word-like" visual features. Smith suggests that changes in socioeconomic contexts drive the process of

repetitious intensification, which makes his model archaeologically traceable through material reflections of such sociopolitical transformations evident in the archaeological record. Thus, although individual social actors may not have had direct control over the developmental processes involved in the emergence of the nascent Chinese writing, the historically particular actions of certain agents effected unintentional consequences that indirectly influenced script development. In contrast to some of the other chapters, Smith downplays both the complexity of early pictographic and semasiographic notational systems and the importance of context. Nevertheless, he presents an alternate interpretation of agency and the role of agents in the emergence of writing—one that cannot and should not be ignored in this dialogue.

Laurel Bestock's chapter serves as a natural bridge between the first and second sections, insofar as she explores context-meaning relationships in the emergence of Egyptian writing, as well as the contextually specific agentive materiality of certain text-artifacts. Bestock suggests that the mortuary context in which early Egyptian scripts are found indicates a desire to communicate across the boundary of life and death to maintain the social identity and agency of deceased individuals. She is less interested in the actual content of the inscriptions and the specific information communicated therein. Rather, Bestock argues that early Egyptian mortuary inscriptions, as part of a suite of material objects, extended individual agency into the afterlife—in Gell's (1998, 36) terms, the inscriptions were secondary agents. Mortuary inscriptions thus served to preserve both the deceased's identity and social relationships, maintaining his personhood, role, and status in death. Bestock's analysis situates Egyptian burial texts in their various significatory and physical contexts and attempts to create a link between the texts and related categories of artifacts and ideological beliefs. Like Jackson (and, later, Englehardt), Bestock questions the distinction between "true writing" and representational art. Echoing Reichel's conclusions regarding the development of writing in Mesopotamia, she sees the emergence of writing as fundamentally linked to the rise of the Egyptian state, locating writing at the intersection of material and ideological agencies—the physical control of goods, resources, and people and the social roles of and relationships between elite individuals that persist even after death. Bestock's approach also foreshadows the contributions that follow (e.g., Carrasco, Wang Haicheng) by explicitly focusing on the materiality of the sign and its presence as image and insisting that the context of early scripts is of the utmost importance to the interpretation of their meaning and functionality.

The first chapter of the second section, by Emily Anderson, is less concerned with identifying the processes involved in the development of early Cretan Bronze Age notational seals, focusing instead on the agentive materiality of the seal "scripts" as material objects. She examines the mutually defining interaction of the social identities of humans and objects, suggesting that

people and artifacts participated in interaction as particular embodiments of distinct social identities within processes of seal use. Anderson suggests that as humans interacted with seal stones and impressions, and with other humans *through* sealings, the social identities of both objects and persons were actively construed. The distinctive stylistic and material attributes of a given object's materiality were incorporated into the object's own social identity as well as an individual's identity, insofar as human individualities were constructed through their interactions with the objects. As such, Anderson explores questions regarding the mutually defining relationship between object and audience, locating both material and social agency at the nexus of individual human action and the construction of meaning. In doing so, she makes the case that texts, in their materiality and use-context(s), had—and *have*—agency. Anderson moves beyond "traditional" textual studies and older, isochrestic conceptions of "style" by showing how seals had identities that actively affected their users and created ties between people and places. These novel ideas on identity and landscape in archaeological and textual interpretation are brought to the fore precisely because of an explicit emphasis on agency and the agency concept.

In chapter 6, Michael Carrasco also deals with issues of materiality and wider context. Like Anderson, Carrasco sees Maya inscriptions as artifacts in a broader material world and questions traditional interpretations regarding the nexus of human action and production of meaning as reflected in the Mayan script tradition. Carrasco examines Maya texts from the perspectives of genre, performance, and materiality to elucidate the relationships among object, audience, and meaning. He argues that the materiality of the support matters greatly to the function, meaning, and performativity of such archaeological objects. Ultimately, Carrasco suggests that the performative aspect of Maya inscriptions is only one facet of the object's meaning, and that differences in genre between inscriptions and the material embodiment or presence of a given text are crucial components of both the agentive power of the inanimate text-artifact and the meaning that the reader ascribes to text. Certain visual representations of both texts and writing itself suggest that these cultural categories were charged with symbolic importance. Moreover, the syntactic structure of various textual narratives and dialogues presents the text-objects as possessing the ability to directly "speak" to the reader, imbuing such written artifacts with a self-referential agentive power. Although it is important to understand the performative context of Maya writing, Carrasco argues, the meaning of a monument or text comes just as much from the power of its textual presence as it does from its narrative or visual content. Thus, writing as embodied in particular media and as part of specific genres of discourse may be thought of as having its own unique material agency.

Cale Johnson and Adam Johnson continue the focus on the materiality of text-artifacts in chapter 7, following the ideas introduced in the contribu-

tions of Bestock, Anderson, and Carrasco in examining the complex relationships among text as archaeological object, interpretant, and meaning. Echoing Smith, Johnson and Johnson explore the contingencies involved in processes of recontextualization in the development of writing systems, specifically focusing on several mid-third millennium BCE texts written in an encrypted form of cuneiform known as UD.GAL.NUN. Like Reichel, although they are unable to identify particular individuals (other than specific scribes) in the inscriptions, Johnson and Johnson are able to discuss in great detail the ways in which cuneiform-inscribed tablets were crafted and produced, ultimately disassociating agency from the conscious actions of individual social actors (echoing Smith). In contrast to Smith, Johnson and Johnson conceive of agency more in terms of individual free will, insofar as scribes enjoyed "moments of contingency" while replicating standardized texts. These moments affected not only the development of UD.GAL.NUN but also the structures in which such texts were crafted. The ultimate goal of their analysis is the reconstruction of sequences of archaeological deposition of these text-artifacts, as well as the agentive forces that drove and shaped such depositional sequences. Johnson and Johnson suggest that in UD.GAL.NUN texts, the comingling of a given sign and its own externalization created gaps or contingencies that necessitated textual innovation to preserve the coherence of the text as a complex whole. In a sense, Johnson and Johnson explore what one might call scribal *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 1990a), insofar as they argue that social structures are of the utmost importance in understanding how scribes faced contingencies and introduced innovation into the textual tradition to preserve or construct new meanings. As such, their contribution touches on a theme present in some ways in all chapters but most fully explored in the subsequent section—the notion that the practice of writing was imbricated in power relationships.

In chapter 8, the first of the third and final section, Joshua Englehardt picks up on the ideas of Johnson and Johnson regarding the effects of sociocultural structures on emerging textual traditions and the power relationships expressed therein, exploring questions of agency in Maya writing from a more structural perspective. He focuses on identifying two aspects of agency in early Maya iconography and texts: the intentionality and historically particular strategic motivations of individual social agents identified in inscriptions, as well as the sometimes unintended structural consequences of the actions of specific individuals. Building on both practice theory and structural historicism (cf. Bourdieu 1990a; Sahlins 1989, 1995), Englehardt seeks to identify agency in the interplay between historical process and event and between structure and individual action. In doing so, he provides an appropriate use of the "individual free will" view of agency, demonstrating how known individuals purposefully engineered texts (and styles) to shape a new political structure via syncretism—a structure that then acted back on those (and other) agents. Individual agents

identified in certain Maya inscriptions, both consciously and unconsciously, transformed social realities, thus playing integral roles in structural change. Such transformations in sociocultural structures are identifiable in the archaeological record. Englehardt is interested in the objective strategies of the social actors involved in a historical event as well as the (sometimes unintentional) structural effects of their actions, seeking to illustrate both the individual and the collective aspects of the structure-event dialectic. He thus demonstrates how textual evidence has the potential to permit a combination of two traditional approaches to the agency concept: individual elite strategy and the role of human action in the structure-event dialectic. Englehardt concludes that the production and consumption of material culture, including texts and iconography, serve to advance the strategically motivated intentions of specific social actors, whose agentive actions feed back into structural and cultural institutions to contextualize, enable, and give meaning to both individual action and the production of written and iconographic texts in the Maya world.

Similarly, in chapter 9 Wang Haicheng explores the conscious intentionality of ancient agents identified in early Warring States period Chinese texts inscribed on three bronze vessels recovered from the tomb of the king of the state of Zhongshan. Wang thus examines comparable issues of political maneuvering of elite strategists, albeit in distinct temporal and spatial contexts. Like Englehardt and Johnson and Johnson, Wang suggests that agency is located within the discourse among practice, structure, and historical event and that it is reflected in material goods. He also maintains that agency is intimately linked to power relationships, particularly in terms of how social identities are created, maintained, and manipulated. In addition, Wang argues that depositional context is fundamental to the interpretation of texts, echoing sentiments expressed in several other chapters, particularly that of Bestock. Wang is interested in deducing the specific motivations of the authors of a particular text. In this sense, he seeks to elucidate human intentions as reflected in the inscription—a fairly straightforward epigraphic endeavor. Nevertheless, Wang deftly shows just how difficult it is to extract this kind of information, despite the wealth of data we have regarding the inscription itself—it is complete, and we understand its archaeological context and may read its content. To understand the texts inscribed on the bronze vessels, we need to know about the processes that led to its inscription, but we have only the result, the artifact. Crucially, Wang injects elements of historical archaeology into his discussion, facilitating the comparison of textual and archaeohistoric evidence and allowing for a more precise identification of social agents in ancient inscriptions, as well as a fuller comprehension of the meaning of individual actions as deduced from texts in their capacity as artifacts. In interpreting such texts, Wang argues, context and process must be considered paramount. Doing so allows Wang to illustrate the motivations, intentions, and consequences of the actions of political agents in the Zhongshan kingdom.

The intentional strategy on the part of elite individuals explored by Englehardt and Wang is not the only thing that agency theorists are interested in, of course, and in the final chapter, Dimitri Nakassis argues that agency is about more than just elite politics, using Linear B inscriptions from the Bronze Age Mycenaean site of Pylos. Although Nakassis does not offer a specific political history of Pylos per se, he does end up speaking to political maneuvering, insofar as the developing Pylian state is both constrained and enabled by individual practice in the structurationist sense (see Giddens 1979, 1984). The mundane and quotidian activities detailed in the texts Nakassis examines provide a window into the social structure and institutions that contextualize individual action and concrete social practice. Insofar as individuals are socially constituted entities, agency cannot be reduced to simple strategic intentionalities, he argues. At the same time, Nakassis insists, sociocultural structures are not independent, static entities but rather are instantiated in the practice of social actors. Although Nakassis's textual evidence appears to identify individuals as little more than names, administrative titles, or bureaucratic offices (recalling Reichel's Mesopotamian seals), his data ultimately suggest that the state and its structural institutions were historically produced and reproduced through interaction by all types of historical actors in various social contexts—not simply high-status individuals in elite ritual contexts. Thus, concludes Nakassis, rather than being an impersonal, faceless bureaucracy, the state is a dynamic social process, one reflected in the Linear B textual records produced at Bronze Age Pylos.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

No agency approach can possibly provide a unified scenario for the development of writing that fits all times and places. That is not the point of this volume, and none of us pretends to offer such a "one-size-fits-all" model. Likewise, we do not suggest that the contributions collected here address or represent all possible theoretical or empirical permutations implicit in the application of the agency concept to the study of early writing, or vice versa. Indeed, many of us do not consider the ways in which the technology of writing may have had agency. Nor do the chapters here explicitly address questions of ancient literacy or means of production, insofar as these may be brought to bear on the agency concept and the role of agents in developing writing. It is clear that the dialogue we have started here must continue if agency and texts are truly to become archaeological concerns.

Our initial abstract for this panel at the Atlanta meetings of the SAA in 2009 was relatively limited in scope: we hoped that the panel would shed light on the role of "real, observable actors (and actions) in the archaeological record." That is, we sought, perhaps somewhat simply and naïvely, to put

some names and faces to the "faceless blobs" that populate archaeological discourse (Tringham 1991, 94) and thereby to ground archaeological discussions of the agency side of the agent/structure duality. The embarrassment of riches that emerged from the panel, our continuing discussions, and the additional chapters written afterward demonstrate that our approach was far too narrow. Indeed, we have been continually struck since then how important writing is to the study of agency in archaeology, and agency to the study of ancient writing, in multiple and overlapping ways. We hope that this volume contributes to an appreciation of and the further inquiry into the richly productive relationship between these two areas of research.