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## THOUGHTS ON THE MNEMONIC FUNCTION OF EARLY SYSTEMS OF WRITING

The object of ancient systems of writing was not to *transmit* information but to *record* it: not to convey fresh information but to *remind* people of what they already knew. In other words it was mnemonic, memorial and commemorative.

The earliest texts are of this nature: they record religious or legal formulae (texts normally learned by heart and transmitted by word of mouth) in order to refresh the memory of present and future generations. The magical efficacy of the formulae depended on precise wording; it was therefore important to record it. This did not involve conveying any *new* information.

There is a sense therefore in which all ancient writing systems are a form of shorthand. This holds for the transitional stages from pictograms to ideograms to alphabets. Early alphabets are still forms of shorthand because their main function continues to be mnemonic.

Sacred texts, often of considerable length, were still normally transmitted by word of mouth long after the development of systems of writing by which they could be recorded in detail, and in some parts of the world they still are. The function of the written text continues to be mnemonic. This is also true in cases where the text is in a sacred language different from the vernacular of the adept (e.g. Latin Vulgate, Arabic Koran).

The development of alphabets which recorded speech sounds was also subject to this principle. The early Semitic and Egyptian scripts only recorded consonants, not vowels. The reader supplied the vowels from previous knowledge. The Hebrew and Arabic alphabets are thus still a form of shorthand, in which the context determines what vowels are supplied in any given case.

The Hebrew word  $\text{פֶּזֶז}$  seen on a food store is by now a logo indicating that the food sold there is in accordance with Jewish ritual prescription. The word consists of three consonants; the system of the language permits a wide variety of different vowels to be supplied, resulting in different words each with its own meaning. This is in theory only; in fact only two forms are attested, the original sense of both of which was quite different. The meaning of this word is determined by the context.

It was centuries before the need to indicate vowels arose among users of the Hebrew and Arabic alphabets. One may perhaps suggest that it arose at a stage when writing began to be used more to communicate fresh information than to record what was already known.

Many very early texts are funerary inscriptions. This is not only because they were made on stone or other durable material and are preserved for that reason, but also

because of the memorial nature of all early writing. In funerary inscriptions the name of the deceased is *recorded*, not communicated.

Ability to read and write began as a priestly closed shop, and the whole sphere of activity had a strong religious aura. The mere fact of recording something in writing came to have a magic significance of its own, irrespective of whether it could ever be read by any human being. I shall return to this.

A very large proportion perhaps the bulk, of early religious writings is thus seen to be memorial, not communicative. This even goes for the texts of the Old Testament written originally in unpointed Hebrew. The texts of the New Testament, written in near-phonetic Greek, are a different case: here a new gospel – a *new* testament – is being proclaimed, and the intention is communicative.

The royal archives preserved e.g. in cuneiform or Linear B are also mnemonic, not communicative. This may serve to explain why texts of this kind survive in large quantities, while very few works of literature are preserved. Literary works contained their own mnemonic structure – the form of the verse and the formulaic nature of their composition – so that there was no need to record them; they were ipso facto memorable in themselves. Those that were not were rightly forgotten. Our (later) texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are mnemonic. Perhaps one could say that Sæmund's *Edda* is mnemonic but Snorri's is communicative.

For Klaus von See it may be interesting to see an application of the foregoing to runes. Arntz considers runes under two aspects – as 'Kultschrift' and as 'Gebrauchsschrift'. The term 'Kultschrift' virtually excludes the idea of communication; writing is a religious act and runic signs are used to form intelligible words. Who is expected to read them? Inscriptions on early artifacts of the type 'X made this for Y' (cp. the early Latin fibula of Praeneste) do not necessarily imply that Y could read the inscription. The object of the inscription is to hallow the gift by the use of magical signs; but in that case any magical sign would do – the *futhark* itself would be sufficient without an intelligible text, and there are plenty of cases in which it was so used. The intelligible text must have been addressed to somebody: who else but the gods? The gift is made within a sacred context, which the gods witness – ("wëttu irmingot obane ab hevane"); they of course can read the inscription and thereby be *reminded* of what it records. So also in funerary inscriptions, some of which were buried in graves (as in Egypt) and thus could *only* be read by the gods. The aim of early runic inscriptions is thus seen to be that of calling the gods to witness – and thus to *remember* – certain actions or certain people. Of the 127 inscriptions treated by Wolfgang Krause in *Die Sprache der urnordischen Runeninschriften* (1971) no less than 84 contain no verb at all, 23 contain a verb in the past tense and 20 in the present. This suggests very strongly that the purpose of the 'Kultschrift' was not merely cultic but also memorial. The parallel with ogham makes it even clearer: this is a pure 'Kultschrift', in which not a single verb is recorded! Even after runes came to be used as a 'Gebrauchsschrift' R.W.V. Elliott could still say: "communication among people remained a secondary function of runic writing throughout its long history" (*Runes*, Manchester 1959, p.2).

The transition from mnemonic to communicative writing is thus seen to be of the utmost importance for early civilisations. The extent to which the two functions con-

tinue to exist side by side; the time the transition takes to be completed; the point at which it occurs; the social structure which conditions it; and the influence of neighbouring cultures: all these still need to be considered.

We are accustomed to assume that the object of writing is and was to represent speech sounds and in that way to communicate information. The foregoing suggests that this is only one of the objects of writing.

We have seen that long after phonetic alphabets had been devised, by means of which speech sounds could be communicated, writing still retained its basically mnemonic function. One example of this is shorthand itself. The stenographer who takes down a letter from dictation in shorthand is not communicating anything to anybody; she is doing it to remind herself of the precise wording of the text. The actual communication is effected by the letter she types. Her boss might say: "Write to Mr Jones and tell him to go jump in a lake"; the note she makes on this would bear little resemblance to the letter she actually writes.

An important mnemonic element still subsists in many alphabetical systems. Languages vary in the extent to which they are pronounced as they are spelt. It is not difficult for an English radio announcer who has learned the rules of Italian pronunciation to pronounce the names of Verdi, Scarlatti or Palestrina correctly; no amount of knowledge of the rules of English pronunciation will enable an Italian announcer to do the same with Dowland or Vaughan Williams; he needs to have some actual knowledge of the English language. By contrast with Italian, English spelling is mnemonic; the written form only serves to remind the reader of a word he already knows. If he does not already know he cannot tell how to pronounce Cirencester, Salisbury, Woolfardisworthy or Mildenhall (Wilts) – /sɪsɪtə, sɔːlbəri, wulzəri, mɪlənəl/. (Mildenhall in Suffolk is pronounced as it is spelled).

On this basis scribal traditions, the usages of known scriptoria or chanceries are seen to be channels of mnemonic communication, not records of speech sounds. Philologists love to think for instance that medieval scribes went to great lengths to reproduce accurately the sounds of their speech. This is *prima facie* unlikely and can be shown in individual cases to be wrong. They had no interest in doing so as long as their readers could understand the text mnemonically; until that no longer worked there was no need for a change. Nobody to my knowledge has tried to determine the point at which this change happened in given areas. And there are very puzzling cases. The *Hildebrandslied* is surely a case of mnemonic recording for posterity, not of phonetic transcription of speech; hence the ultimate unimportance (despite the efforts of generations of gifted philologists) of the strange linguistic mixture it presents. Each reader would reconstruct his own text.

In the fifteenth century in Western and Central Europe chanceries and scriptoria went in for a great proliferation of consonants, especially in Germany and the Low Countries. For instance the German word "und" could be written "vnndt", and very bizarre spellings were frequent. In no language did this fashion reflect any phonetic change; what it reflected was the circumstance that chancery scribes were paid pro rata so much per line and that they tended to pad their lines out with unnecessary letters. The result was a text that departed widely from actual speech and which was only viable at all by virtue of the mnemonic function of writing. (R.A.S.

Macalister thought that the same thing happened in ogham: arbitrary duplication of consonants arose because payment was probably made according to the length of the inscription assessed by the number of its component strokes). Another reason was probably the 'closed-shop' mentality of scribes and their desire in an age of increasing literacy to safeguard their special skills by introducing unnecessary complications. In some chanceries this tradition remained strong until well into the eighteenth century, when rationalising tendencies made themselves felt and spelling reforms were introduced. It would be interesting to establish the exact time of the change in individual places.

It is important to remember that scribal traditions, in ancient as in modern times, are developed to make things easy for scribes, not for any one else, and that scribes are under no pressure to write phonetically but under considerable pressure to write in accordance with tradition. The result can be seen in the so-called 'historical' spelling of English, Irish and French. Chancery influence in Germany was less strong in the field of spelling than in that of style and syntax; in England and France it was the other way round. The reasons for this are obscure.

Put rather differently: even the most strictly phonetic system of writing only offers an approximation to the actual realisation of speech-sounds by individual speakers. The extent and the closeness of this approximation can vary very widely. At one end of the scale the approximation is so distant that it is only by virtue of the mnemonic function of writing that communication can be effected at all. This is the case with English and French.

It would seem that all systems of writing involve a mnemonic element to a greater or a lesser extent, and that insufficient attention is paid to it by philologists and linguists.

But Socrates said this a long time ago when he maintained that only a very naive person could think "written words of any use except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275 d).

This essay was written and in the hands of the editor before I had seen the important publication by Aleida and Jan Assmann and Christof Hardmeier, *Schrift und Gedächtnis, Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (Munich 1983). To my great relief I found nothing in it which ran counter to the ideas I have put forward above.