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Writing Defines an Empire's People

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Abstract

Writing plays a crucial role in the development of nation-states across time. This paper argues that written language largely determines productivity and the creation of order in empires, providing examples of how writings provided a means of effective communication, leads to the creation of political and social order, and stimulates overall expansion of civilizations over time.

Cuneiform: The Origin of Writing

Dating back to its earliest forms, writing allowed growing civilizations a means to advance, grow, and establish many powers. Written language has helped to organized societies past and present, both socially and politically. Cuneiform usage developed and enforced social hierarchies, which became more complex as time passed. For instance, the relatively simple Mesopotamian legal systems eventually gave way to the more complex systems and hierarchies of Rome and Han China. This form of organization called for civilizations to dominate and conquer territories because those within the empire understood their roles and places in a singular society dictated by writing, enhancing empires' abilities to send messages, keep records, collect taxes and provision armies.¹

Growing civilizations, such as those found in early Mesopotamia around 3000 BCE, required methods of tracking and accounting for food. The agricultural era gave rise to cuneiform, an early form of a singular writing system, which began to appear on various tablets from the ancient Uruk civilizations.² Cuneiform helped ancient societies manage food production and consumption, making it easier to create a unified class system. Scribes of the time kept track of the distribution of goods which allowed an accurate depiction of their numbers and the resources need to sustain it. Mesopotamian society flourished and the chaos of expanding populations necessitated a greater use of cuneiform.

Simultaneously, writing also provided means of promotion and propaganda for their conquering empires and their hierarchy. Writers used their skills to enable effective communication between neighboring civilizations, spreading propaganda to promote their ideals. The development of written language was a major turning point in history for early human civilizations because it allowed them to communicate their ideologies and religions. Writing in forms of legal texts and narrative stories became vital tools in an empire's ability to sustain itself leading to the creation of legal standards creating order and establishment of social classes as well as the overall spread of religions.

¹ Ikeda, Jun, and Shigeo Yamada. "The World's Oldest Writing in Mesopotamia and the Japanese Writing System." In *Ancient West Asian Civilization*, pp. 157-163. Springer Singapore, 2017.

² Montgomery, David. "Rivers of Life." In *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Writing on Stone Tablets: A Rendition of Ancient Politics

Some of the next generation of civilizations that rose to power around 1000 BCE effectively used their writing systems to establish a more centralized society by engraving legal text on stone or clay tablets which would be displayed for citizens to see. These legal manuscripts allowed everyday citizens a sense of order as they are presented by their rulers a set of rules they must obey. For example, The Code of Hammurabi, an early Mesopotamian legal code, provided an effective means of order as the laws imprinted on stones influenced their citizens by outlining sets of rules. The Code presented laws regarding diverse subjects, such as labor division, slavery, food distribution, and even adultery.³ Laws like Law #196 of the Code dictated retribution for any for any wrongdoing, giving a sense of justice to the Mesopotamia society:

If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If one break a man's bone, they shall break his bone. If one destroy the eye of a freeman or break the bone of a freeman he shall pay one gold mina. If one destroy the eye of a man's slave or break a bone of a man's slave he shall pay one-half his price.⁴

It also gives us a clear example of types of punishment that were expected for particular crimes. The Code served as a general guideline to deal with disputes, promoting the idea of fairness.

Many Laws in Hammurabi's Code, such as the Law #265, take on the pursuit of justice and order within their society:

If a herdsman, to whose care cattle or sheep have been entrusted, be guilty of fraud and make false returns of the natural increase, or sell them for money, then shall he be convicted and pay the owner ten times the loss.⁵

Hammurabi's Code implemented a set of regulations that pertained to a variety of different matters. The reference to herdsman is indicative of developed labor divisions as a result of this legal code, as it specially mandates the consequences that would occur if someone considered a herdsman did not follow his obligations to the owner of the cattle. It becomes evident that society becomes dependent on the the rules defined in the code, ensuring previously implied social divisions created prior.

In addition to establishing laws, writing also maintained social order through everyday bureaucratic tasks like record keeping. Allowing for easier management of goods, record keeping established additional social classes and increased the distinctions between the preexisting classes. Ancient Mycenaean scribes took on the responsibility of defining the social classes of their society, and detailing how resources would be divided among them. The scribes recorded their work on stone tablets written in the Linear B script providing specific details of the social roles

³ Ruth Mostern, "Trade, Debt, And Law," (Presentation, History 10: Introduction to World History to 1450, University of California, Merced, Merced, CA, [September 23, 2015]).

⁴ King, L. W. "The Avalon Project : Code of Hammurabi." The Avalon Project : Code of Hammurabi. Accessed December 16, 2016.

⁵ King, L. W. "The Avalon Project : Code of Hammurabi." The Avalon Project : Code of Hammurabi. Accessed December 16, 2016.

of priests, slaves, landlords, bureaucrats, and the gods.⁶ Record keeping reinforced the social order of the law, allotting more resources to those higher up in the social hierarchy.

Narratives as Promotion for Growing City-States

Narratives and propaganda allowed polities to spread depictions of themselves and gain supporters abroad. As Evident with the Sumerian epic Gilgamesh, the line between history, folklore, religion, and propaganda was often blurred. The Sumerians used the Epic of Gilgamesh to stir up support, displaying Gilgamesh as a proud man and fierce warrior. His story inspired others to join and expand Sumeria, the land of Gilgamesh, portraying those outside the glamorous greatness of Sumer as wild men.⁷ The character of Enkidu in the epic serves as the best example of how citizens of ancient civilizations may have come to understand Sumer's glorified depiction from 2100 BC at the time of its creation, onward.

Enkidu in the tale was portrayed as barbarous and it was not until he was exposed to the Sumerian city life that he was able to become great and fulfill his purpose of besting Gilgamesh. Told in form of a story, the Epic was able to reach across the known world through the use of inscribed tablets, showcasing Enkidu's accomplishments and drawing more people into the Sumerian way of life. Writing was key in effective communication across families and city states, allowing many to express either personal or public messages to their neighboring citizens in the form of stories like Gilgamesh.⁸ It was this communication that caused civilizations to become popular and expand in size and population.

An Increase of Social Complexity

As civilizations continued to grow in size and complexity they began to rely more on inscribed legal codes. Dating back to 300 BCE and as late 1000 CE, great empires used legal codes to regulate and maintain their expanded societies by allowing their citizens a clear picture of moral right and wrongs and who held power. The Roman Municipal Charter is a prime example of the regulations later societies imposed. Much like the Code of Hammurabi, these Roman legal codes established a sense of political order within the Roman town, as they heavily emphasized the roles of each class within Roman Society.⁹ Roman law differed from Sumerian law, however, as the Romans were able to move on from the simplistic "eye for an eye" mentality and create an early form of human rights. The Charter dictates many rights and obligations certain individuals had in society, leaving little to inference. Under the Charter, the Roman office known as the Aedile had the right of everything from grain supply to marketplaces, to baths, and even the meeting of the night watch.¹⁰

⁶ Tignor, Robert L. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York, New York: W.W. Norton &, 2011. 98, 118, 247, 268, 271.

⁷ Jamieson, Andrew. "Empires of Ancient Mesopotamia." *Agora* 51, no. 3 (2016): 45.

⁸ Jamieson, Andrew. "Empires of Ancient Mesopotamia." *Agora* 51, no. 3 (2016): 45.

⁹ Tignor, Robert L. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York, New York: W.W. Norton &, 2011. 98, 118, 247, 268, 271.

¹⁰ Tignor, Robert L. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York, New York: W.W. Norton &, 2011. 98, 118, 247, 268, 271.

Roman quaestors, which were high ranking officials appointed by the Roman Republic council, were granted the right to collect and manage the town's funds and usage of public slaves.¹¹ These types of mandates were unseen in the Code of Hammurabi and demonstrate the growing complexity of political ideology. Rights were needed to sustain order across the numerous towns and vast distances of the Roman Empire. Writing addressed the problem of sustainability with an increasing population, allowing the Roman Empire to record and regulate their consumption of resources like food and land on a daily bases.¹² The Romans were able to restrict resource combustion, though ultimately such measures proved ineffective. Written legal codes remain a crucial part of Imperial society, and their complexity and volume indicate that empires have grown steadily more complex over time.

Written language also stimulated social interactions between Roman citizens. The Birthday Invitation of Claudia Severa, serves as an example of how Latin had become a necessity in the everyday activities of upper class Romans. Written around 100 AD, the letter is written partly by several herself, inviting a fellow roman woman Sulpicia Lepidina to a birthday celebration.¹³ The letter profoundly demonstrated the civilians' mastery of the Latin language allowing for many social and institutional ideals of higher education, a concept that is absent from previous civilizations. With writing being necessary to complete daily activities, the need for more educated individuals to help contribute to the empire rose.

The Spread of Religious Writings

Writings advocated singularity in order to strengthen an empire's image against other civilizations. An example of this is the exchange, not only of goods, but also of religion that took place along the Silk Road.¹⁴ This spread of empires' needs and beliefs spread across the Silk Road, allowing for travelers to hear and adapt stores from trading civilizations. Many travelers used writings to allow a more decorative representation of their travels and homelands, spreading religious doctrines to speak unification of citizens between different empires.

Religions as a unifying force outside of state power often times did not appeal to governing forces of larger entities. For example, The Memorial on Burning of Books in the Han Empire was an event that sought to unify a singular political ideology of the Han Empire by destroying any books showcasing a different ideology or religion.¹⁵ Targets of this unified ideology propaganda included the Five Confucius Classics, which were seen as an affront to and burden to the growing imperial power of the expansive Han empire. This further indicated writing's use as propaganda within large Empires, like the Han Dynasty. It has changed over time as propaganda has moved away from narrative sorties depicting society to philosophical texts provoking others to do away with their aged ideologies.

¹¹ Pearson, Elizabeth Hazel. "The development of army administration in the Roman Republic." PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2016.

¹² Tainter, Joseph A. "Energy, Complexity, and Sustainability: A Historical Perspective." *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*. December 13, 2010.

¹³ Tignor, Robert L. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York, New York: W.W. Norton &, 2011. 98, 118, 247, 268, 271.

¹⁴ Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), Chapter 2, "Religion and Trade in Ancient Eurasia"

¹⁵ Tignor, Robert L. *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York, New York: W.W. Norton &, 2011. 98, 118, 247, 268, 271.

Writing as A Catalyst: An Interpretation

The use of writing is the key to understanding how quickly and efficiently humans were able to increase the size and maintain the complexity of their empires. Written legal texts and narratives proved to be quite useful in establishing a regulated society; one that advocated for the growth of their culture. These expanding civilizations necessitated an equivalent expansion of written language, fostering more complexity. The usage of writing escalated overtime allowing for many different uses of writing to unify a society. Writing came to play a major role in an empire's ability to sustain itself, advocating political and structural power and allowing for the expansion of social groups.

Without writing, advances in economics, government, and literature simply would not have been possible, as it is the largest reason as to why advanced systems have continued to expand and grow over time. Ancient writings like those from the River Valley Civilizations were drastically different from those of the Roman and Han empires, but the empires retained similar idealisms on how one should govern and regulate a population. These ideals continue today in our modern society and have influenced vast implications of law. Writing and its effective way to communicate ideas to one another is the most valuable of discoveries in the ancient world. Both ancient and modern nation-states were and are able to dominate their territories using their developed written language.

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