

TAVANTA

PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL
FOR THE STUDY OF ANTIQUITY

Editors:

D.W.P. Burgersdijk, M. Hoo, P.H.A. Houten, A. Willi

PROCEEDINGS OF THE DUTCH
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

We are delighted to present TALANTA volume 54, containing six articles and a book review. This is a special volume in several ways. It is the first issue published by a new editorial team. In 2021, after decades of service for TALANTA, the editors Jan Stronk and Maarten de Weerd gracefully stepped down and entrusted the journal to three new editors: Diederik Burgersdijk, Milinda Hoo, and Pieter Houten. We humbly accepted the task to continue the journal, reinvigorate it, and bring it to new heights. We take the opportunity here to thank Jan and Maarten for their trust, their hard work for the journal, and their continuing involvement. The vibrant history of TALANTA can be read on our website: www.talanta.nl.

New discoveries, scholarly paradigms, and interests in global history have opened up novel lines of inquiry and research which we would like to embrace. Adapting our scholarship and readership to the current academic landscape, TALANTA now welcomes studies not only on the Mediterranean world, the Near East, and the Black Sea region, but also on the world of Iran and Central Asia, as well as East-West relations between and across them, from the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity. The Iranian world has always been of interest, especially under the aegis of Jan Stronk, but is now made explicit in TALANTA's statement.

This volume, thus, is the first result of the journal's new beginnings in 2021. This year was met with several daunting challenges. As new editors, we began our task amidst a global pandemic which not only deeply impacted our personal and professional lives, but also severely impaired the transition in significant ways. We worked on the journal across countries, in lockdown, and alongside full-time academic employment. The process of renewal and the restructuring of, amongst others, the editorial board, the board of the Dutch Archaeological and Historical Society (NAHG), the workflow, and the website, proved an immense undertaking that is still ongoing. In October 2021, Fred Woudhuizen, a pillar to the journal, tragically passed away. He was the treasurer of the NAHG and editorial secretary of TALANTA. To honour his person and scholarship, we start this issue with an In Memoriam of Fred.

Finally, we thank our authors for their work, patience, and trust, and hope to continue to receive interesting submissions in the coming year with the editorial assistance of Anna Willi.

The Editors
Diederik Burgersdijk
Milinda Hoo
Pieter Houten

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SCALE SCRIPTITIOUS:
THE CONCENTRATION OF DIVINE POWER
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Scott B. Noegel

In this study, I offer an explanation for how the literati of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt came to believe their respective scripts were ontologically powerful, possessing agency and efficacy. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Gaston Bachelard, Susan Stewart, and John Mack, I argue that the creation of the pictographic cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts constitutes a process of miniaturization (and metonymy). Thus, the erudite Mesopotamians and Egyptians understood their pictographic signs not as mere representations, but as miniaturized embodiments of objects, in contradistinction to the Israelites, whose consonantal signs only represented sounds, and who consequently located this power in the spoken word. I further submit that we may place the miniaturization of objects through the technology of writing in the greater context of the miniaturization of ritual objects found in numerous cultic and burial sites throughout the Near East and Mediterranean world, from predynastic times through Late Antiquity. Finally, I contend that within this context, the micrographic texts from Ketef Hinnom and Qumran represent a further development in which the pictographic origins of the script were no longer recognized or perceived as ontologically meaningful.

The Performative Power of Ancient Near Eastern Scripts: The Problem of Origins¹

It has long been acknowledged that the highly literate cultic experts of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt understood their respective writing systems as possessing a ritually empowered agency and efficacy that one might label ‘magical’.²

¹ I delivered a previous version of this paper at a conference on ‘The Minor and Miniature’ at Indiana University on April 11-12, 2014. I thank Jonathan Ready for the kind invitation to participate.

² On the problematic term ‘magic’, see Noegel, Walker, and Wheeler 2003, 1-17.

The users of these writing systems believed that they did not merely communicate, but could affect reality. Informing this understanding was a belief in the divine origin of language and the ontological power of speech, both spoken and written. Georges Contenau characterizes the Mesopotamian conception:

Since to know and pronounce the name of an object instantly endowed it with reality, and created power over it, and since the degree of knowledge and consequently of power was strengthened by the tone of voice in which the name was uttered, writing, which was a permanent record of the name, naturally contributed to this power, as did both drawing and sculpture, since both were a means of asserting knowledge of the object and consequently of exercising over it the power which knowledge gave.³

At least from the Middle Babylonian period onwards, a master scholar, whether serving as an author or redactor, would have been responsible for transmitting a wide variety of texts including the full gamut of performative lore (e.g., exorcists' corpus, lamentation priests' corpus, *Enuma Anu Enlil*, physiognomic omens of *Alamdimmu*, medical omens, omens of human utterance, and a variety of myths) directly 'from the mouth of the God Ea'.⁴ Thus, they saw themselves as the final link in a chain of divine transmission and as guardians of the *pirištū ša ilī* 'secrets of the gods'.⁵

The Egyptians also attributed divine origins to their script, referring to it as the *md.w ntr.w* 'words of the gods,' and they deemed those who mastered writing capable of affecting the cosmos.⁶ Thus, David Frankfurter characterizes their notion of script as follows: 'Egyptian letters were the chief technology of a hierocratic scribal elite who preserved and enacted rituals—and by extension the cosmic order itself—through the written word'.⁷

Such statements are well-known and widely accepted in the respective disciplines and have been repeated in various ways by numerous scholars as matters of fact. I too accept such views as accurate. However, here I should like to draw attention to the fact that little by way of explanation has been offered as to why or how this belief in the cosmic and/or ontological power of the word/script came into being. Usually, a nod is given, either explicitly (like Frankfurter) or

³ Contenau 1955, 164.

⁴ Michalowski 1996, 186.

⁵ Sjöberg 1972, 126-131; Lenzi 2008.

⁶ Egyptian texts refer to the god Thoth as the inventor of writing and one who is 'excellent of magic' (*mnḥ ḥkꜣ*) and 'Lord of hieroglyphs' (*nb md.w ntr.w*). They sometimes depict him writing the hieroglyphic feather sign representing *maat* (*mꜣꜥ.t*), the divine force that maintains the cosmic order. On the concept of *maat*, see Teeter 1997.

⁷ Frankfurter 1994, 192.

more often implicitly (like Contenau), to the ritual role that writing played in the religions of these regions—the assumption being that a religious setting and its accompanying rituals provided the perfect environment to foster this view. Similarly, it often is assumed that such power was vested first in the oral word (like Contenau) and was transferred to written forms when writing was invented. While certainly the religious milieus in which the literati plied their expertise provided an authoritative and numinous context in which one might consider one’s language divine in origin, it does not follow necessarily that the languages’ written forms would share that power. Consider the case of the Greek alphabet, whose writers did not attribute agency or ontological power to the alphabet even when used to compose texts that were deemed sacred. In fact, in the Aegean world generally there appears to have been something of an ambivalence, if not often hostility, toward writing as a medium of communication.⁸

A New Proposal

I should like to propose that we can account for the ontological and performative dimension that the ancients attributed to their scripts, at least in part, if we understand the development of these early writing systems as a process of miniaturization.⁹ I divide my presentation of the evidence into three parts. In the first, I survey three influential studies that offer theoretical insights for understanding miniaturism. In the second, I apply these insights to three Near Eastern writing systems: Mesopotamian cuneiform, hieroglyphic Egyptian, and the consonantal Hebrew script of ancient Israel. Here I contend that the consonantal script marks a departure from miniaturism, and that consequently, Israelites did not share the ontological conception of signs found in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In the third segment, I argue that we may place the miniaturization of objects through the technology of writing in the greater context of the miniaturization of ritual objects found in numerous cultic and burial sites throughout the Near East and Mediterranean world, from predynastic times through Late Antiquity.

Three Theoretical Studies on the Miniature

Few figures have elucidated our understanding of things miniature as much as Gaston Bachelard, Susan Stewart, and John Mack. Though each represents a

⁸ See Manetti 1993. Plato’s view of writing as something that leads to forgetfulness is representative (*Phaedrus* 274c-277a).

⁹ Artemis Karnava has examined Cretan hieroglyphic signs as miniaturizations of the objects they represent (2015). Nevertheless, her study, which appeared independently a year after I first presented this essay, focuses on the cognitive processes that may have influenced the script’s conformity to conventions of size, scale, and proportion. Karnava further opines that the signs might relate to the votive offering of miniaturized pots, animals, limbs, and figurines. Her contribution does not engage the theoretical and performative implications discussed herein.

very different discipline, their combined work offers mutually informative insights, and thus, they provide a useful framework for considering Near Eastern writing systems. Since many in the field of ancient Near Eastern Studies are likely unfamiliar with their works, I herewith provide a brief synopsis of their orientations and contributions.

In Bachelard's book on the poetics of space, he investigates architecture as lived experience and the meaning of architectural spaces in poetry.¹⁰ He examines spaces that only can be inhabited imaginatively, such as drawers, nests, shells, and of course, miniatures. This leads him to consider the structure of an imagined space, even the architecture of the imagination. Bachelard argues that such spaces allow us to move in what he calls 'ontological ways,' and to discover the ways in which we construct meaning *within* and *of* such spaces.¹¹ Bachelard avers that reducing the scale of an object enables one to possess that object, and that an increased focus on an object's minute details naturally increases that object's stature. Bachelard also argues that inherent in the miniature is a new macrocosm.

Susan Stewart's treatment of miniaturism in Western literature draws on the fields of semiotics and aesthetics as well as feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic criticism.¹² Her primary interests are in examining the relationships of language to experience, the body to scale, and narratives to objects. For Stewart, the miniature is a cultural product that serves as a metaphor for interiority. She argues that the labor required to make miniatures often paradoxically increases their value and significance, and that consequently, miniatures have the capacity to transform their contexts. For Stewart, miniatures transform the time and space relations of everyday life, and create another time that permits no change or instability of lived reality. Thus, diminutive scales offer opportunities to communicate ideas within a miniature, ordered world, away from external chaos.

John Mack's work builds upon that of Stewart, but focuses on the world of material artifacts of numerous global cultures, past and present.¹³ Mack's anthropological approach explores miniaturization as metonymy and as a cultural field in which condensation and concentration take place. His treatment of religious and divinatory miniatures is particularly relevant, because ritual professionals controlled textual production in the ancient Near East. For Mack, the miniature worlds of such figures constitute microcosms of secrecy and power. Their potency derives from the reduction of their essences, which their creators achieve by a technology of enchantment or magic. Mack opines that a miniature's ability to

¹⁰ Bachelard 1957.

¹¹ Bachelard 1957, 239.

¹² Stewart 1984.

¹³ Mack 2007.

enchant is enhanced by its strangeness and dimensionality, which make it appear visually more powerful.

Bachelard, Stewart, and Mack have contributed in manifold ways to move the study of miniaturism beyond the descriptive realm. Their works reveal the production of miniatures to be technological and cultural processes closely tied to conceptions of order, interiority, ontology, and cosmology. Concomitantly, we may see the products of miniaturization as capable of evoking, concealing, imbuing, communicating, and enchanting these conceptions in ways that far outsize the larger objects they represent.

Though Bachelard, Stewart, and Mack never discussed ancient Near Eastern writing systems as forms of miniaturization, I aver that understanding them as such offers a sound explanation for how they came to be viewed as ontologically powerful, and inherently possessing agency and efficacy. If we also recognize the role that writing played in Near Eastern ritual magic and divination, and that the ancient scholars regarded themselves as transmitters of divine knowledge,¹⁴ then we must consider the production of signs as a ritual of miniaturization, a topic to which I return below. With these considerations in mind, I now move to the writing systems of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and ancient Israel, and discuss them in the light of our theorists.

Three Ancient Near Eastern Scripts and Miniaturization

When the Sumerians invented cuneiform, around 3200 BCE, they used it to record the activities of cultic administrators who tallied the number of goods brought to temples.¹⁵ Initially, they wrote cuneiform vertically and read it top to bottom and right to left, but progressively the signs rotated left by 90 degrees, and by about 2000 BCE, it became standard to read and write the script from left to right (Fig. 1).

The script was pictographic, and though it evolved into a complex syllabic and logographic system of hundreds of abstract signs, the objects the signs represented remained common knowledge among the scribal elite.¹⁶ Mesopotamians held no conceptual distinction between a cuneiform ‘sign,’ an ‘omen,’ or a ‘visual

¹⁴ On Mesopotamian scribes as transmitters of divine knowledge, see Michalowski 1996, 177-193. On writing as a religious act of devotion in Egypt, see Ragazzoli 2019, 485-489.

¹⁵ Schmandt-Besserat 1996.

¹⁶ Kiernan (2015, 46) argues for the utility of viewing the miniaturized ritual objects along art-historical lines as existing on a spectrum of representation that ranges from realistic representation, at the one end, to non-representational abstract, at the other. Certainly, we may apply such a continuum to the development of the scripts considered here, though always with the qualifier that the scribes always knew a sign’s pictographic origins.

image,’ and they used the same word, i.e., *ittu*, for each.¹⁷ Thus, their gods could convey their ‘signs’ in clay and stone, but also in animal livers, dreams, and constellations.¹⁸

Fundamental to the invention of writing are the processes of miniaturization and metonymy. To demonstrate, I turn to the cuneiform sign SAG (Fig. 1).

Speakers of Sumerian and of Akkadian both understood the sign to mean ‘head,’ though Sumerians pronounced it */saĝ/*, the Sumerian word for ‘head,’ and speakers of Akkadian pronounced it */rešul/*, their word for ‘head’. However, like all cuneiform signs, it did not merely *signify* or *represent* a ‘head,’ it *was* a head, in the *concentrated* form of a sign. It was a miniaturized *embodiment*. Thus, a cuneiform sign functioned like a miniature portrait, about which Stewart remarks: ‘Like other forms of magic, it guarantees the presence of an absent other through either contagion or representation’.¹⁹ In shape and name, cuneiform signs embodied the essences of objects, and therefore, they attained and retained what Mack has called a miniature’s ‘cosmological relationship’ with the world: the potential for a miniature, as a mimesis of its larger prototype, to be perceived as sharing its ontological essence.²⁰

The cuneiform system was not only pictographic; it was metonymic. Most signs also possessed phonetic values. For example, the sign SAG meaning ‘head,’ also represented the sounds */sag/* and */reš/*, and thus, the same sign could be employed as a syllabic component in other words (e.g., *e-sag-kal-lu* ‘foremost’ or *e-reš-tu* ‘desire’).

Cuneiform signs were forever the technological privilege of a few polymaths, expert in ritual, astronomy, medicine, and divination. By cultivating the notion that cuneiform signs were not mere signifiers, but reduced embodiments of essence, the scribes promoted what Stewart has called a corresponding ‘multiplication of ideological properties’.²¹ As Stephanie Langin-Hooper remarks, ‘Through their appealing and non-threatening materiality, miniatures established an intimate connection with their users that encouraged identity sharing and illusions of power over the outside world’.²² Mack also has observed that a diviner’s miniature constitutes a microcosm, which the diviner studies ‘to identify essential

¹⁷ *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* I/J 304-310, s.v. *ittu* A.

¹⁸ Jean Nougayrol has suggested that terms for ‘liver’ (i.e., *amūtu*) and ‘word’ (i.e., *awātu*) may be related etymologically. See Nougayrol 1944-1945, 14n54; Jeyes 1989, 17, 46. Astrologers viewed the constellations as the *šijir šamē* ‘writing of heaven’. See Reiner 1995, 9.

¹⁹ Stewart 1984, 126.

²⁰ Mack 2007, 72.

²¹ Stewart 1984, 47-48.

²² Langin-Hooper 2015.

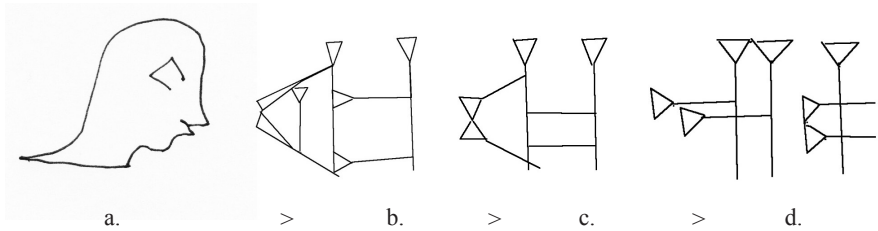


Fig. 1. a. The sign SAG 3400 B.C. Drawing by Labat 1988.
 b. signs rotated 90° left by 2600 B.C.
 c. 2000 B.C.
 d. 1000 B.C.

realities'.²³ Each sign, with its multiple logographic and phonetic values, could communicate endless esoteric and potent interpretations. Bachelard's comment on miniatures is apropos:

...values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Platonic dialectics of large and small do not suffice for us to become cognizant of the dynamic virtues of miniature thinking. One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small.²⁴

To the great illiterate majority, the system's strange wedges only widened the chasms between the known and unknown, interior and exterior, expert and commoner, divine and mortal. As Mack observes, 'The peculiar, by contrast, bears a semantic content that is much greater than itself, a hidden meaning awaiting discovery'.²⁵ Since the technical prowess behind the written script transcended most people's ability to comprehend it, it naturally was construed as inherently powerful.²⁶ With Mack, we might say that 'To represent ordinary things on an ever reducing scale is, arguably, to render them more powerful in visual terms' (2007, 6). An inscription, like that of King Assurnasirpal II in the 9th century BCE (Fig. 2a-b), only reified the power of scribal knowledge by placing at eye level a text that only a select few could read.²⁷

²³ Mack 2007, 72.

²⁴ Bachelard 1957, 150.

²⁵ Mack 2007, 68.

²⁶ Gell 1992, 49.

²⁷ The cuneiform wedges also were painted a separate color, likely bright blue. See Thapalan, Stenger, and Snow 2016.

Stewart's observation that 'writing can be displayed as both object and knowledge,' is particularly fitting,²⁸ as is Mack's remark on miniatures: 'We are forever denied ultimate access to their interiority and the secrets they may contain'.²⁹

Enhancing the perception that written signs shared the ontological essences of the objects that they embody, was the material upon which the ritual elites primarily wrote their texts—clay.³⁰ Gods used clay to create humans, the placental afterbirth was called clay, and people used clay to build their homes.³¹ Thus, clay was the material of creation for gods and humans. When a scribe impressed a stylus into clay, he gave form to language, and participated in creation by condensing the essence of a thing into miniature form.³²

The cosmological import of writing explains why scribal elites felt they could control the cosmos by using writing to interpret divine messages. They accomplished this by transcribing the divine sign into cuneiform signs and analyzing the values suggested by their written forms. Thus, in a dream omen, we find:

If a man dreams that he is traveling to Idran (*id-ra-an*); he will free himself from a crime (*Á-ra-an*).

K. 2582 rev ii, x + 21

Here the diviner based his interpretation on the syllabic spelling of Idran, for the cuneiform sign *id* also has the value *Á*, thus suggesting *aran* 'crime'. The example illustrates well Mack's description of how diviners use miniatures to 'strip away contingency and redundancy to identify something more elemental,' and how their miniatures, as imbued macrocosms, 'change the conditions of the world in which people live'.³³

Features of an animal's exta also could be read as cuneiform in extispicy omens: 'When (the) lobe is like the grapheme (named) *kaškaš*, (then) Adad will inundate (with rain)'.³⁴ The name of the sign *kaškaš* suggests the word *kaškaššu*

²⁸ Stewart 1984, 35.

²⁹ Mack 2007, 207.

³⁰ Noegel 2004, 133-143.

³¹ Kilmer 1987, 211-213.

³² The nexus between creation, writing, and architecture is evident in Mesopotamian idioms for speaking and creation that employ the verb 'build'. Thus, in *Enuma Elish* XI:175-176, Ea, the god of magic, 'builds' his words, just as the gods 'build' the first human from clay: *mannuma ša lā dEa amātu ibann[u]* 'Who other than Ea can build a word/idea?' Note that God does not 'create' Eve in the Hebrew Bible, but rather 'builds' her from Adam's rib (Gen 2:22). The text employs the cognate verb *bānāh* 'build'.

³³ Mack 2007, 72.

³⁴ I discuss this and other such omens in greater depth in Noegel 2007, 11-24.

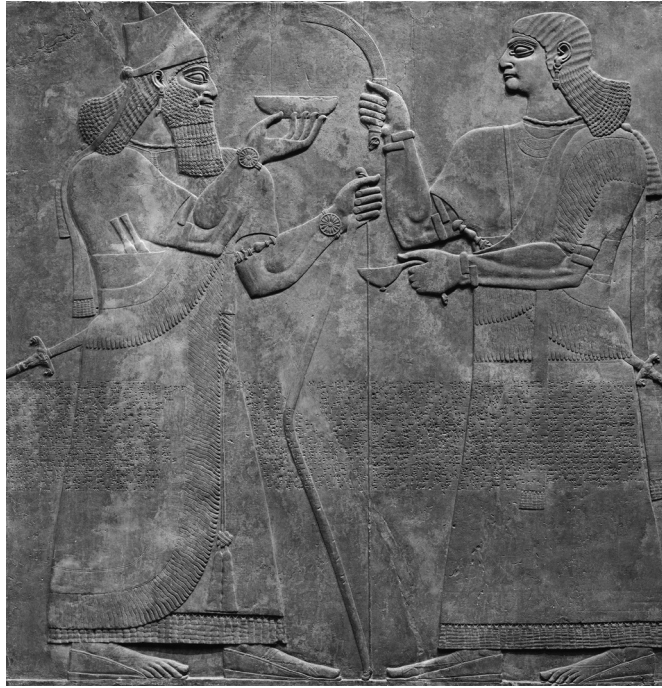


Fig. 2a. The king holding a ceremonial cup. The reliefs are on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (32.143.4). Photographs by the author.

Fig. 2b. Detail of text at eye level.

meaning ‘powerful,’ an epithet used of the storm god Adad, thus providing the reason for the omen’s interpretation. Again, as reduced essences the cuneiform signs provided the diviner with what Mack has described as ‘the venue for the confrontation with cosmological realities’.³⁵ Even the resemblance of the sign was enough to demonstrate what Stewart has described as a miniature’s capacity to evoke responses that far exceed their physical dimensions. At the same time the sign’s inherent manipulability allowed experts to control it, and thus manufacture a stay against evil and disorder. Stewart’s understanding of miniatures as representing ‘...a mental world of proportion, control, and balance...’, applies well to the ritual use of cuneiform signs, as does Bachelard’s note that reduction allows one to possess an object and hold power over it.³⁶

The preoccupation with performative power and maintaining cosmic order also informs the format and organization of the numerous divinatory compendia and lexical lists that the scribal elites produced.³⁷ The lists aimed to place the cosmos in order by creating a taxonomy that could be understood and controlled through ritual power.³⁸ Douglass Bailey’s remark is fitting: ‘By reducing the world-at-large’s reality, a miniature provides a way of making sense of that world. Literally, it makes the world manageable’.³⁹ Thus, we may see the scribal lists of cuneiform signs as an ordered collection of miniatures that functioned much like a library or museum, as Stewart observes:

The collection is often about containment on the level of its content and on the level of the series, but it is also about containment in a more abstract sense. Like Noah’s ark, those great civic collections, the library and the museum, seek to represent experience within a mode of control and confinement. One cannot know everything about the world, but one can at least approach closed knowledge through the collection.⁴⁰

In Egypt, writing appeared independently around 3200 BCE, first as signage for various objects, but it gradually developed into a more complete system over the next few hundred years. The hieroglyphic system is written in multiple directions, and like cuneiform, its signs never lost their visual associations. It is

³⁵ Mack 2007, 113.

³⁶ Stewart 1984, 74; Bachelard 1957, 150.

³⁷ Veldhuis 2014; Van De Mieroop 2016, 35-84.

³⁸ Note the observation of Joan Goodnick Westenholz: ‘...the earliest lexical compilations may have been more than a utilitarian convenience for the scribes who wrote them; that they may have contained a systematization of the world order; and that at least one was considered as containing “secret lore” (1998, 451)’.

³⁹ Bailey 2005, 33.

⁴⁰ Stewart 1984, 161; cf. Mack 2007, 75. On Mesopotamian lists, see Larsen 1987, 203-225; Westenholz 1998, 451-462; Frahm 2011, 242-256.

entirely pictographic and functions on phonetic, syllabic, and logographic levels. Thus, the hieroglyphic sign *sʒ* (𓂏) reads logographically as ‘duck,’ but by homonymity also as ‘son’ or ‘amulet’. It also can represent the sound /sʒ/ as a syllable in another word.⁴¹

Like cuneiform, the signs were miniaturized embodiments, and scribes did not distinguish between a ‘sign,’ a ‘written word,’ or ‘visual image,’ and they used the same word (i.e., *tjt*) for each. One could read sculptures as signs and use drawings as tools of performative power, for as Robert Ritner explains: ‘The very notions of divinity and imagery are cojoined in Egyptian thought; the conventional term for “god” (*ntr*) has as its root meaning “image”...’.⁴²

The ritual manipulation of image/text is well known in ancient Egypt. In execration rituals, priests would fashion pots or figurines, write the names of Egypt’s enemies upon them, and then stab, trample, dismember, burn, drown, or otherwise bury them, to affect the same result on their living prototype.⁴³ The objects did not merely represent Egypt’s enemies, they embodied them, and thus, they served as manipulable miniatures. The Egyptians would have agreed with Bachelard, that ‘...the infinitesimal is master of energies, small commands large’.⁴⁴ Indeed, the writing system allowed priests to envision their miniaturized image-signs in what Bachelard has called ‘ontological ways’. Through compression and abstraction the script enabled those ‘in the know’ to manipulate reality.⁴⁵ According to David O’Connor, writing was

... ritually and magically empowered to literally transform contexts (temples, tombs, palaces and others) into cosmically charged settings that reflect the belief that the activities carried out in them were effective beyond the human realm.⁴⁶

As in Mesopotamia, this was achieved by rendering a divine sign into hieroglyphic signs. See, for example, the following dream omen.⁴⁷

⁴¹ As in Mesopotamia, Egyptian scribes understood hieroglyphic texts in architectural idioms. Thus, a ‘house’ in Egyptian can refer to a stanza of poetry, and ‘bricks’ and ‘walls’ can refer to stichs and lines. Compare the following rabbinic texts, Talmud Bavli, *Megillah* 16b; Talmud Yerushalmi, *Megillah* 3:7 (74b) which refer to the poem in Exodus 15 as built of alternating stichs of ארייה על גבי לבינה ולבינה על גבי ארייה ‘a half brick over a whole brick, and a whole brick over a half brick’.

⁴² Ritner 1993, 51.

⁴³ Ritner 1993, 111-180.

⁴⁴ Bachelard 1957, 166.



⁴⁵ Bailey 2005, 32.

⁴⁶ O’Connor 1997, 17-18.

⁴⁷ Noegel and Szpakowska 2006, 193-212.

ḥr mꜣꜣ j ḥ wbn=f; nfr htp n=fjn nṯ=f

...upon seeing the moon when it rises (); good, (it means) his god is being clement to him.⁴⁸

Here, the sign for the god Horus () follows the word *wbn* ‘risen,’ rather than the expected sunrise sign () , as the verb’s ‘determinative,’ i.e., a sign that follows a word in order to classify it. Thus, the Horus determinative in the protasis provides a justification for the apodosis, which interprets the omen as the actions of a god. In essence, scribal experts controlled the concentration of divine power miniaturized in hieroglyphic signs. As Bachelard observes: ‘The miniature deploys to the dimensions of a universe. Once more, large is contained in something small’.⁴⁹ Citing Lin Foxhall on miniaturism, we may view the script

...as a kind of ‘intertextuality’ of materiality, where miniatures epitomize, echo and reverberate meanings captured in and associated with other objects, while creating new meanings of their own, which potentially enrich and alter both the miniature itself and its prototype.⁵⁰

With Mack, we also can assert that ‘...the processes of creating small things are not simply technologies for reducing scale but also imply a corresponding exaggeration of content’.⁵¹ Indeed, as Bachelard, Stewart, and Mack have shown, miniaturizations are viewed as more powerful, effective, and dangerous than their larger counterparts. This certainly is the case with the hieroglyphic script, for some signs, like serpents and people, were viewed as so threatening, that one finds them drawn pierced with knives or severed with grains of sand to prevent reunification in the afterlife.⁵² Such practices recall Carl Knappett’s observation that ‘Miniaturised forms can indeed transcend physical space, as their size facilitates transport. This property can be further explored through an unlikely source: the realm of voodoo and magic’.⁵³

Given the shared conceptions of script in the dominant cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, we should expect to find a similar conception in ancient Israel. Yet, this is not the case. The Hebrew writing system contains only twenty-two consonants. Though the signs evolved from pictographs, by the time of the Israelites, each sign was limited to a phonetic value that sounded the initial consonant of the object it once represented. This resulted in a disembodiment, i.e., a remov-

⁴⁸ *P. Chester Beatty III* r. 5.22

⁴⁹ Bachelard 1957, 157.

⁵⁰ Foxhall 2015, 1.

⁵¹ Mack 2007, 1.

⁵² Ritner 1993, 157, 163-167.

⁵³ Knappett 2012, 102-103.

al of the miniaturized object from the signs' possible values. The acrophonic system was only mnemonic and so it could not communicate simultaneously on aural and visual registers like the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts. Its associative dimension was restricted to devices of sound, and so the performative dimension ascribed to individual signs in Mesopotamia and Egypt finds no parallel in Israel.⁵⁴ Thus, unlike the Egyptian conception of creation, in which the creator god's idea of the created universe was put into the form of hieroglyphic writing, the book of Genesis reports creation as solely an oral work (Gen 1:3).⁵⁵

Since the Hebrew signs were not understood as miniaturizations, they could not concentrate the essence and power of objects, and thus, the performative power once located in a system of signs shifted to the oral word.⁵⁶ As a consequence, the Hebrew term for 'word,' i.e., דָּבָר (*dābār*), also came to mean 'matter,' 'thing,' and 'object,' and the prohibition against making images did not extend to the making of texts. Moreover, the Israelite conception of divine power invested in the oral word meant that a human could embody the same potential for performative power that a cuneiform or hieroglyphic sign could in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Thus, the prophet Isaiah refers to himself and his children as לְאוֹת וּלְמוֹפְתִים (*lě'ōtôt ul-mōfîm*) 'signs and portents' (Isa 8:18), and the prophet Ezekiel becomes an אוֹת ('*ōt*) 'sign' while pronouncing a siege against Israel (Ezek 4:3).⁵⁷ Thus in the same way that the pictographic scripts played formative roles in Mesopotamian and Egyptian conceptions of performative power, the non-pictographic script played a role in shaping the Israelite conception. Typically, one tends to think of cosmological views shaping a culture's

⁵⁴ Though beyond the scope of this article, a brief look at the other peoples of the ancient Near East who employed a consonantal script appears to support this argument. Within this corpus, we possess no texts that evidence a belief in the performative properties of the script, nor does this corpus offer us any cosmological text on a par with the creation in Genesis 1-3. Nevertheless, they do provide limited evidence for a belief in the efficacy of the spoken word. For example, the alphabetic cuneiform texts from Ugarit attribute performative power to the spoken word when the divine artisan Kothar-wa-Īšasi enlivens Baal's weapons by invoking their names (*Epic of Baal*, CAT 1.2 iv 11-26). See Sanders 2004, 173-174. Several Phoenician and Aramaic inscriptions also include performative curse formulae for warding off would-be grave robbers and destroyers of steles. So there does appear to have been some belief in the ritual efficacy of spoken words. See Kitz 2013.

⁵⁵ On creation and writing, see Assmann 2003; Frankfurter 1994. Note that later Jewish tradition recalls the role of the alphabet in the creative process. See, e.g., Talmud Bavli, *Menahot* 29b, which explains the raised letter *he-* in *b^hbr'm*: 'with the *he-* ... he created them (the heavens and the earth)'. Cf. *Midrash Rabbah* 1:10. The latter view likely represents Mesopotamian influence on the Babylonian rabbinic academies.

⁵⁶ Nevertheless, some biblical acrostics appear to reflect an awareness of the consonants' names and numerical values. See Noegel 2021, 224-229.

⁵⁷ The Hebrew word אוֹת ('*ōt*) 'sign, omen' derives from a root meaning 'to mark'. Thus, it also came to mean an alphabetic 'sign'. See my discussion of this in Noegel 2010a, 143-162, 154n39.

conception of its writing system. However, here we must consider the generative role that ancient writing systems had on shaping cosmological views.

Miniaturization and Ritual in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean World

The performative power of reduction is not unique to the cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems. It is frequently attested in the form of ritual objects found throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world and in all periods, from prehistory through Late Antiquity. The evidence is so large and widespread that I can only scratch the surface here. Suffice it to mention the use of miniaturized cups, bowls, jars, jugs, offering tables, weapons, animals, models, and other objects that functioned like their larger counterparts in numerous offering rituals. These tiny objects are attested in Mesopotamia,⁵⁸ Egypt,⁵⁹ Anatolia,⁶⁰ Crete,⁶¹ and many sites in the Levant,⁶² as well as the greater Aegean⁶³. In Israel, 'Miniature vases have been found at Tel Anafa, Beth Yerah, Tel Dor, Tell el-Ful, Jaffa-Nahlat Yehuda, Jerusalem, Masada, Ramat Rahel and Samaria, in contexts ranging from the third century BCE to the first century CE'.⁶⁴ To these varied objects we may add numerous Egyptian items including the many models of everyday life which began to appear in Middle Kingdom Egypt, the ubiquitous production of amulets of all kinds, and the long-standing tradition of interring *ushabti*-figurines to serve the deceased.⁶⁵ The combined evidence demonstrates that beliefs in the ontological and performative dimensions of reduction have had a long existence in the region, and therefore, it is reasonable to think that they could have similarly informed the invention and development of the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts.

Micrographic Texts

This brings me to the priestly amulet from Ketef Hinnom (7th-6th century BCE),⁶⁶ and the tiny tefillin and mezuzoth from Qumran (3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE),⁶⁷ the likes of which, of course, are sanctioned in the Hebrew Bible

⁵⁸ Langin-Hooper 2015.

⁵⁹ Lacovara 1988; Swain 1995; Allen 2006; Odler and Dulíková 2015.

⁶⁰ Meskell 2015.

⁶¹ Tournavitou 2009.

⁶² Naeh 2012; Paz and Shoval 2012; Richard 2013, 2019.

⁶³ Knappett 2012; Barfoed 2015.

⁶⁴ Hershkovitz 1986, 45.

⁶⁵ Taylor 2001.

⁶⁶ The silver amulet measures 12.7 x 38.1mm (0.5 x 1.5in). For a treatment of the Ketef Hinnom texts, see Barkay, *et al.* 2004, 41-70; Avner and Zelinger 2001, 82-84, *124-*126. Na'aman 2011, 184-195, argues that the amulets date to the early Second Temple period, not long after the temple's construction.

⁶⁷ Yadin 1969.

(e.g., Deut 6:8-9, 11:20). These texts represent some of the earliest known cases of micrographia. Indeed, the letters on the tefillin measure a mere 0.5 x 0.7mm (.019 x .028in), thus making them objects of specialized production.⁶⁸ This recalls Stewart's reflection that cases of micrographia push the limits of skill by experimenting with the ways in which the body creates them. The creator often must contort one's body, strain one's eyes, and sometimes alter one's breathing to make a miniature. Indeed, the performative dimension of these objects is clear from their usage, and recalls the observation of Mack that owners of micrographic religious texts see them as more effective than their larger counterparts.⁶⁹

The micrographic amulet, tefillin, and mezuzoth are of special interest within the context of miniaturization as they represent a further development in the ontological conception of writing. The relocation of divine power from the individual sign to the oral word also changed the perception of the written word.⁷⁰ The Israelites did not perceive their Hebrew consonants as miniaturized embodiments, and thus, further empowerment could take place only by miniaturizing the texts themselves.

Moreover, the tiny texts from Ketef Hinnom and Qumran are not only miniaturizations, they are metonymies. They do not contain the entirety of Jewish sacred writ, but only a few lines of text that serve to evoke it *pars pro toto*.⁷¹ Thus, we may see them functioning like micrographic books of later ages, about which Stewart remarks:

the social space of the miniature book might be seen as the social space, in miniature, of all books: the book as talisman to the body and emblem of the self; the book as microcosm and macrocosm...⁷²

Nevertheless, the way these texts were rolled up ensured that their users would never truly read them.⁷³ As such, they present what Stewart has called

⁶⁸ Studies of these texts have not moved beyond the descriptive realm and typically have focused on philological issues or on whether some form of magnifying glass was used to produce them.

⁶⁹ Mack 2007, 167-170

⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the permanence of the written word continued to find expression in Israelite texts. See, e.g., Exod 32:33; Job 19:23; and Noegel 2010b, 33-46.

⁷¹ See similarly, John Chrysostom's condemnatory reference to 'small Gospels' suspended from women's necks, which Luijendijk 2014, 424-425, has shown, refer to amulets that contained biblical incipits and other excerpts that functioned 'to evoke the power of the *entire* word of God' (author's emphasis). On the performative use of incipits from sacred texts in Late Antique Egypt, see Sanzo 2012.

⁷² Stewart 1984, 41.

⁷³ The Ketef Hinnom text was inscribed on silver, and thus, its maker intended its rolled, amuletic form to be permanent.

...a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.⁷⁴

Moreover, even if one should have unrolled the amulets, the text would have tested the limits of one's vision, thus, ironically magnifying its perceived power.⁷⁵ As Sheila Kohring remarks: 'Investment, labour, choices and care all contribute to making an object that transcends the mundane... as though the object appears only to have come about through magic'.⁷⁶ Indeed, as Mack concludes: 'The makers of miniature things are well aware that the evaluation of their skill is linked to an observer's sense of the impossibility of what they are trying to achieve'.⁷⁷

Of course, their function as containers of holy text also contributed to their perceived power.⁷⁸ Thus, they were miniature *products* and *objects* of ritual. Jonathan Z. Smith has connected the making of miniaturized altars and cultic implements in Late Antiquity with the transfer of religious practices from the temple to domestic spheres and mobile ritualists.⁷⁹ As he observes, among the cult practices transformed at this time

...it is not purification, or incubation, or even sacrifice that predominates. Rather, the chief ritual activity... appears to be *the act of writing itself*...⁸⁰

Moreover, the ritual of writing does not constitute a replacement of some ritual practices, but rather it is

...a displacement of ritual practice into writing, analogous, in important respects, to the displacement of sacrifice into speech in the emergent Judaism and Christianities..., and it is also a continuation of the impulse toward miniaturization.⁸¹

If one concedes that Near Eastern scribal elites understood writing as a ritualized act, and that they conceived of their signs as miniature embodiments, then we need to place Smith's 'impulse toward miniaturization' in a much deeper past.⁸²

⁷⁴ Stewart 1984, 69.

⁷⁵ My colleague Gary Martin has performed a number of experiments to test the limits of how small one might write a tefillin without the aid of a magnifying glass. He found that he could produce them even smaller than those found at Qumran by being nearsighted and knowing the text. See <http://saybro.com/aol/bt/tefillin.html>.

⁷⁶ Kohring 2011, 36.

⁷⁷ Mack 2007, 10.

⁷⁸ Lewis 2012, 99-113; Smoak 2012, 202-236.

⁷⁹ Smith 1995, 13-28; 1998, 18-31.

⁸⁰ Smith 1998, 28 (author's emphasis).

⁸¹ Smith 1998, 29.

⁸² Smith 1998, 29; Quack 2009, also has challenged Smith and has observed that the tendency towards miniaturization had long been part of Egyptian ritual practice, and that only the loss of traditional temple structures was new in Late Antiquity.

Nevertheless, with Smith, we may see the texts from Ketef Hinnom and Qumran as representing ‘...a sort of *ritual of ritual*, existing, among other loci, in a space best described as discursive or intellectual’.⁸³ These diminutive ritual texts represent a movable, even transferrable, ritual space onto which the expert has inscribed sacrality.

The practice of sacred micrographia did not end in the Second Temple period. One may cite the existence of several miniature Christian codices, Manichean documents, and Greek codices from Late Antiquity.⁸⁴ From the 15th century, we also find tiny breviaries and other scriptural bibelot,⁸⁵ and from the 17th century CE, pocket Bibles and ‘thumb Bibles’. Much more recently, on December 17, 2007, the Technion Institute in Haifa announced that it had placed the entire Hebrew Bible onto a silicon surface less than half the size of a grain of sugar.⁸⁶ The achievement naturally was hailed as a sign of the increasing power of technology, a power that I contend was first wielded when the cultic professionals of the ancient Near East used their new technology of writing to miniaturize the objects of everyday life into their textual embodiments.

Conclusion

In summary, I have argued that we may best explain ancient Near Eastern beliefs concerning the power and agency of writing by viewing the development of pictographic scripts as the creation of miniatures. By drawing on the theoretical insights of Bachelard, Stewart, and Mack, we have seen that, like other miniatures, the scripts represent the result of technological and cultural processes closely tied to conceptions of order, interiority, ontology, and cosmology. In this context, the non-pictographic consonantal system marked, even as it contributed to, a shift in perception from an ontological power condensed in signs as miniature embodiments to an ontological power located in the spoken word. The Ketef Hinnom and Qumran texts mark yet another stage in this development, for they miniaturize and metonymize texts whose consonants were no longer recognized as ontologically meaningful. Moreover, these texts, and the earlier reduction of objects to signs, may be seen in tandem with the long-standing miniaturization of ritual implements found throughout the wider Near East and Mediterranean world.

⁸³ Smith 1998, 29; Moyer and Dieleman 2003, make a similar observation concerning the miniaturized Egyptian ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual in Late Antiquity (author’s emphasis).

⁸⁴ See Henrichs and Koenen 1970; Kruger 2002, 81-94; Kraus 2004, 485-497; Römer 2009, 632-633; Hope and Worp 2006, 226-258. As with the tefillin and mezuzoth, the study of these tiny texts too remains largely a descriptive enterprise.

⁸⁵ For a bibliography on thumb Bibles from the 17th to the 19th centuries, see Adomeit 1980. On miniature Bibles generally, see Metzger 2002, 118-119.

⁸⁶ Announced in the *Jerusalem Post*, 17 December, 2007. Before this time, the smallest Bible measured 1.1 x 1.3 x 0.4in, and weighed a feathery .04 ounces, at least according to Guinness World Records, the registrar of all things most miniature and monumental.

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