

Script, Literacy and orality in the Aegean before the alphabet

In the traditional evolutionary (XIX century) and neoevolutionary (XXth century) thought the introduction of script has been considered a fundamental step in social evolution, deeply affecting social complexity and generally marking the emergence of the “state” and the passage from “prehistory” to “history”. In this perspective, the appearance of writing has been interpreted as a package involving always administration, religion and historiography.

Today, however, a deeper knowledge in the field of early scripts has shown that writing can be used in different ways in different social contexts and that it can be more or less widespread, sometimes limited to a very restrict range of uses and users. Literacy, from this point of view, indicates the real diffusion of the ability to write and to read (the two features are not necessarily linked together) within a given society.

For the Aegean of the second millennium, as it is known, many scripts were in use: Hieroglyphic, Linear A, Linear B, Cyprominoan plus one or two variants (as the Writing of Archanes or the Writing of the Phaistos Disk). All of them are syllabic script, less complex than the Near Eastern contemporary cuneiform scripts, partially related from a formal point of view and generally linked with palatial administration. Beyond the shared administrative aspect, however, their diffusion (literacy) was different: Hieroglyphic and especially Linear A demonstrates a deeper rooting in Minoan society, being found not only in tablets and sealings but also in pottery, stone vases, jewellery, seals, even incised or painted on walls. Notwithstanding difficulties in learning, Linear A survived the destruction of Minoan palaces for almost one century. Linear B instead has been found only in tablets, sealings and official inscriptions on vases, and ceased with the collapse of Mycenaean palatial society. Cyprominoan, at the border with the Near Eastern writing area, instead, found a large diffusion in the field of religion (dedications etc.) and survived the end of the Bronze Age through its adaptation to Greek in the Cypriot syllabary well used until the IV century B.C. probably because less limited to palatial reality.

All in all, however, a limited number of documents has survived, which raises the question if a whole world of written texts in perishable materials existed or if writing covered only part of social communication. In this case, still large part of personal and official interactions should happen within the realm of oral communication, personal trust and extended memory.

Social memory lead us to the last point of our seminar: did a epic poetry exist before Homer? According to some scholars, some hints in the field of iconography (wall paintings and vase paintings) seem to suggest that not only epic was widespread within Mycenaean courts, but also that the origin of some cycles of Homeric poems were sung during banquets in the XIV and XIII century. A fascinating theory, that deserves, however, more evidence to be accepted.