

*Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies*. By Geoffrey Yeo. New York: Routledge, 2021. 205 pp. Index. Hardcover. \$160.00. eBook. \$44.05.

*Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* by Geoffrey Yeo explores the beginnings of human recording practices. This volume also seeks to update Ernst Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World* (1972), which Yeo feels was a landmark text in its time but is now outdated. Yeo clearly defines the scope of the book as looking at early record making and record keeping in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Aegean, and the Americas. He acknowledges that this volume does not comment on the contributions of Indigenous cultures in North America or the Indus Valley civilizations, as their 4,000-year-old script is still undeciphered. The vast records created by the Roman and Chinese ruling bodies are also not discussed, as Yeo focuses attention on the earliest developments of record making and record keeping. Even with this tightly defined scope, this book does cover a significant geographical and historical span.

A key conceptual framework of this book is the idea of records as “persistent representations.” Yeo defines “representations” as something standing for something else, such as an event or activity, and “it is a persistent representation because it has the capacity to remain available after the ending of the activity or event it represents” (p. viii). Records do not need to last forever to be persistent, but they do have the capacity to outlive the immediate contexts in which they were created. Yeo focuses on records, not as acts of preservation or later historical significance, as this was a much later concept, but regarding their relationships to activities and events and their durability to potentially outlast the activities and events they represent (p. viii).

In the first two chapters, Yeo explores the earliest forms of record making and record keeping. In chapter 1, “How Records Began: Representation and Persistence,” Yeo discusses the emergence of “memory aids,” or using objects or features of the landscape to help trigger the memory of an event or of specific types of knowledge. The admission of the weakness and limits of human memory also leads to counting aids, such as knots on a cord. Counting aids give the ability to recall the count if contested and to offer proof of an action. Chapter 2 deals with ownership marks and seals. Ownership marks provided a way to inscribe objects with the identity of the owner. Seals became a way to connect objects to a particular individual and acted as a method of access control. Pottery vessels sealed with clay are an example given of how seals could control access, as it would be obvious if the vessel had been opened, but also of how the style of the seal indicated what individual or family owned the vessel. These seals and ownership marks indicate the growing economic complexity of societies.

Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on specific geographic regions and the emergence of writing. Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Aegean, early China, and the precolonial Americas are regions where writing developed independently and at different times. These chapters are incredibly detailed, almost to a fault. Yeo discusses the use of clay envelopes as perhaps one of the first methods to document chain of custody and the development of protocuneiform writing and numerical notation. While the subject matter is certainly interesting and relevant to those working in the field of archives, the level of detail does rise to that of ancient history or archaeology.

Chapter 5, “Creating and Storing Written Records and Archives: The Proliferation of Records in South-west Asia, Egypt, and Greece,” examines the spread of records after the appearance of writing techniques. Yeo examines the spread of cuneiform tablets from Mesopotamia to Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. The emergence of temple administration repositories in Mesopotamia, which were stores of written records relating to royal rule and the economic affairs of the region, indicated the growing economic and social sophistication of society. This chapter also details the emergence of the first legal and land records, and how the ability to write the spoken word led to treaties, marriage settlements, wills, and letter correspondence.

The growth and relevance of records is examined in chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6, “Orality and Literacy: Confidence in Records,” details the growing role of written records and the lasting impact of oral traditions. While written records helped supplement human memory, oral traditions did not disappear. These ancient societies honored both means of record creation, but writing was certainly a means for the powerful to remain powerful in a society. Chapter 7, “Orality, Record-making, and Social Action,” details how early records reflected “speech acts.” Speech acts is a theory that language is performative no matter where it is found and is used to convey action (p. 147). These early records document actions such as land transfers, sales of goods, marriages, treaties, declarations of war, and commemorations of events or people.

The final chapter, “Concluding Thoughts: Archival Science and Early Records,” examines the relevance of current archival practice to the records made and kept in these early societies. Throughout the chapter, Yeo cautions against the attempt to link Western archival practices with the record making and record keeping of early societies. He warns not to link the motives of modern records to the records of early societies, as it is not possible to fully suppose the priorities of early record making from the vantage point of our modern practices. Though Yeo cautions about falsely creating links between modern archival practices and record-making actions in the past, he does acknowledge that early societies probably dealt with some difficulties similar to those of modern archivists. He discusses how early societies likely contended to some degree with authenticity, controlled access, storage, and duration of storage.

*Record-Keeping and Record-Making in Early Societies* does bring a much-needed update to Posner’s *Archives in the Ancient World*. Yeo provides a detailed look at specific record-making and record-keeping early societies, almost to the point of overwhelming the casual reader, but the volume is doubtlessly useful to archivists wishing to understand the history of records. This volume also provides a robust list of additional readings should a reader want to learn more. Yeo discourages scholars and readers from suggesting a continuity of archival practices from the past to the present and discusses the need for more archival scholarship in the study of early records and societies.

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