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# From Clay to Stone: Material Practices and Writing in Third Millennium Mesopotamia

## 1 Introduction

Materiality has become a widely used term in anglophone archaeology and anthropology in the last decade or two, joined by “new materialism”, the “material turn”, and “symmetrical archaeology”. These various concepts and their underpinnings have been adopted and adapted from other disciplines, based in large measure on the premise that scholarship has given insufficient attention to the material basis of social life. As observed by one practitioner of the “material turn”, the “materiality of social life has been marginalized—even stigmatized—in scientific and philosophical discourses during the 20th century”.<sup>1</sup>

When confronted with a relatively new term or concept, it is useful to begin by reflecting on why it is of interest in general as well as why it is of interest now. To be flippant, one might say that for archaeologists, materiality offers a sophisticated-sounding justification for a long-standing preoccupation with material objects that is more or less given by the nature of the field. For assyriologists and related scholars of ancient texts, the adoption of a materiality approach represents an oft belated recognition that the written record consists of writing *on* something and *by* someone, rather than being composed of disembodied ideas.<sup>2</sup>

It is probably no accident that the material turn comes at a time of unprecedented consumerism in many, albeit not all, corners of the globe, when large numbers of people—especially those of us who write and talk about notions like materiality—are almost completely detached from material production. Materiality studies have followed this sign of the times and have tended to situate themselves squarely in the realm of consumption.

## 2 What is Materiality?

At its most fundamental the term materiality has been used in anglophone archaeological and cultural anthropological discussions to spotlight the role of material things (objects) in constituting social life and social beings (persons). Crucially, this

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<sup>1</sup> Olsen 2003, 87.

<sup>2</sup> See in this regard Hilgert 2010; Taylor 2011.

is meant to showcase more than simply the fact that things are made of materials: materiality is not synonymous with material or matter.

A concern with materiality in archaeology was initially popularized by the work of Daniel Miller and his students and colleagues.<sup>3</sup> For Miller a fundamental element in the concept of materiality is the process of objectification. He draws on Hegel's notion that there is "no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality".<sup>4</sup> Objectification involves separation and the creation of form that results from it—whether material or intangible—that in turn provides a mirror in which we see and also constitute ourselves. Miller writes:

We cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as material culture and continues to evolve through us.<sup>5</sup>

Objectification must be understood as always in process, that which gives form and produces what *appear to be* autonomous objects and subjects. For Miller, both subjects and objects are merely appearances emerging out of the process of objectification.<sup>6</sup> Yet as an anthropologist rather than a philosopher, he contends that we must engage with the world in a way that makes sense to people, that is, *as if* subjects and objects are distinct categories.

Much of Miller's work has been firmly located in studies of consumption in contemporary societies.<sup>7</sup> This emphasis has been seen by some scholars as a needed counterpart to longstanding concerns with production and exchange, especially in archaeology, but it has not gone without critique by others who contend that it has become too focused on shopping and the desire for things.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly a recognition of consumption as an important element of human activity and meaning construction has helped to rectify an over-focus on production. However, a swing of the pendulum to the opposite extreme is equally troubling. Although western societies tend to prioritize end products—"consumables" as finished products—in other social contexts a far greater emphasis is placed on working with materials and fashioning of things, rather than primarily on using them, as the anthropologist Timothy Ingold has emphasized. For Ingold, a "thing" is characterized

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<sup>3</sup> See especially Miller 2005a.

<sup>4</sup> Miller 2005b, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Miller 2005b, 8.

<sup>6</sup> These notions are in some respects clearer in German, where the word for object, *Gegenstand*, clearly denotes the non-identity of that which is objectified in relation to a subject (*was dagegen steht*).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Miller 1987, 1998; Banerjee/Miller 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Olsen 2003, 91–94; see also Carrier/Heyman 1997; Ingold 2007.

by being always in the making, in motion, in contrast to an “object” which he describes as a “*fait accompli*”.<sup>9</sup>

The heavy focus on consumption is particularly critical in the kinds of complex, hierarchically structured societies with strong divisions of labor that we are examining in third millennium Mesopotamia: societies where knowledges and relations to material objects are likely to have differed quite sharply between those who made things—producers—and those who used them—consumers—even if they remained closer and were characterized more by mutual knowledge than in today’s world. To take just one example, the knowledge and skills of a scribe who wrote a tablet and his/her interactions with the scribal product were surely quite different than those between a person who commissioned a text but could not read or write it and the objects bearing writing that that person possessed. In turn these distinctions have the potential to create differential relations of power and different kinds of persons.

A much discussed element of materiality studies that relates to the questioning of conventional subject-object boundaries has been the issue of agency and the question of whether things can be said to “have agency”. Alfred Gell, whose work has had a considerable influence in anglophone archaeology, argued that because material things have consequences for people and how people act, things can be said to have agency.<sup>10</sup> However, in contrast to Gell’s notion of a “secondary agency” that characterizes non-humans, the growing interest in posthumanist approaches has taken such arguments in far more radical directions.<sup>11</sup>

As one of the best known proponents of posthumanism, Bruno Latour has argued against privileging the social and the human at the expense of the non-human world, including both animate beings and inanimate things. He emphasizes the importance of both human and non-human actors, a call that has been echoed by archaeologists who promote a “symmetrical archaeology”.<sup>12</sup> Latour and others subscribing to a “symmetrical” view accuse the social sciences of an unjustified anthropocentrism and of having contributed to a “purification” of the world that tries to discount the existence of hybrids. Ultimately this approach involves a radical dissolution of the modernist boundaries between subject and object, between people and things, to be replaced by an acknowledgment of the distributedness of agentic capacities that are no longer understood as a specific characteristic of humans, but which rather characterizes so-called “actants”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ingold 2007, 2010, 4. In contrast, I do not make a sharp distinction between these terms.

<sup>10</sup> Gell 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Latour 1996, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Olsen 2003; Shanks 2007; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007; Webmoor/Witmore 2008; Alberti et al. 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Roßler 2008.

Most scholars who have adopted approaches that can be broadly grouped as the “material turn” have, like Miller in his understanding of objectification, placed an emphasis on process rather than static states. Ingold has argued that we need an ontology that gives primacy to the making of things rather than to finished products, to transformations and flows rather than to states of being,<sup>14</sup> noting that it takes an effort to keep things in a constant state.<sup>15</sup> Ingold, as well as proponents of the “new materialism”, have pointed to the productive capacities of materials.<sup>16</sup> Things are said not to exist outside of the relations in which they are enmeshed, and in these relationships “all things [...] have the potential to materially impact all other things”.<sup>17</sup>

For at least some of its adherents, the material turn has significant political and ethical dimensions. These stem first and foremost from an acknowledgment of the destructiveness that has accompanied a modernist western ontology’s insistence on the boundedness of subjects and objects, with the corresponding assumption that the subject is the active element, the master, and the object the passive one. The negative impact of this stance is forcefully argued in terms of global climate change as well as the detrimental impacts these worldviews have had on the lives of non-Western people.<sup>18</sup> On the positive side, archaeologists have pointed to the discipline’s capacities to intervene by examining the long term “in a period pervaded by very short-term thought” that “determin[es] our global futures”.<sup>19</sup> The role of complex causation has also been highlighted, an implication of which is that the results of interactions—and hence of history—are unpredictable.<sup>20</sup>

To briefly summarize, approaches that can be broadly collected under the rubric of the material turn offer crucial insights regarding the mutual interactions between people and things and especially the ways in which the material world shapes and constrains people. While some scholars have insisted on the recognition that through their interactions things and people constitute one another in a continual process of becoming,<sup>21</sup> a posthumanist stance, following Latour, seeks to dissolve the distinction between subject and object altogether.

To me a posthumanist approach, with its emphasis on symmetry and actants, goes too far. Instead I place the process of subjectification at the center of interest. In many ways the mirror image of objectification, subjectification explores the ways in which interactions among people and between people and their material worlds constitute subjects (as well as objects). If we attribute a central role to subjectifica-

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**14** Ingold 2010.

**15** Ingold 2010, 8–10; see also González-Ruibal 2008.

**16** Coole/Frost 2010, 7–13.

**17** Fowles in Alberti et al. 2011, 906; Witmore in Alberti et al. 2011, 898; Hodder 2012.

**18** Fowles in Alberti et al. 2011; Coole/Frost 2010, 8; see also Burmeister 2012, 46–47.

**19** Witmore 2007, 548; see also Robb/Pauketat 2013.

**20** Coole/Frost 2010, 14.

**21** Ingold 2007; Pollock 2007, 2013; Pollock/Bernbeck 2010; Bernbeck 2008.

tion rather than objectification, we acknowledge the fundamental contribution of people (subjects) to shaping and modifying the material world and imbuing their creations with meaning—all of which, in turn, shape subjects. Being modest about being human, as posthumanists insist, may indeed be appropriate, as long as we acknowledge at the same time that we, along with our forebears, have played a major role in creating the very forms that subjectivize us. The claims of posthumanism leave us just one step away from dissolving the importance of people's ethical and political responsibility for their actions as well as effacing the political economic interests that underpin many of the realms in which posthumanism can be most clearly recognized, for example, biotechnology.<sup>22</sup>

Among the important elements of an engagement with materiality, I single out three as especially central to my purposes in this paper. The first is the focus on things always being in process rather than static or complete. Second is the fundamental importance of the multiple interactions among people, the things they produce and the subjects that are thereby continually in the making. Finally, the things that people make and use not only enable but also constrain people's possible scope for acting.

### 3 Mesopotamia in the Early Dynastic Period

I turn now to some thoughts on the ways in which insights from the material turn can illuminate aspects of the early use of writing in Mesopotamia. Starting in the late fourth but most pronounced in the third millennium, Mesopotamia witnessed an unprecedented explosion of material objects produced, used, and discarded, made in a great variety of materials, forms, and sheer quantities. Involved in these processes of materialization and discard were new techniques and tools and the putting to use of existing ones in new and different ways.<sup>23</sup> Around the same time—in the late fourth millennium—writing appeared and over the course of the following centuries underwent a variety of profound modifications. I will examine three sets of changes related to the specific materiality of writing and its development from its origins through the first half of the third millennium BCE. These are (1) the extensions of writing to different media, (2) temporality and especially an orientation toward the future, and (3) mechanical reproduction. Central to my argument is that the material dimensions of those things that bore writing shaped their makers and users—subjects—in specific ways; in other words, as people made things, their actions as well as the products thereof in turn opened up as well as constrained possibilities (*Handlungsräume*) for the future.

<sup>22</sup> Burmeister 2012, 48–49; Gottwald/Krätzer 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Moorey 1994; Bernbeck 2004.

## 4 The Medium

The earliest known writing, from the Late Uruk period, occurs solely on clay tablets. This choice of material was part of a millennia-long tradition in which clay was used as the material par excellence for memory storage tools, including tokens and sealings. Soon after its initial appearance on clay tablets, writing was extended to the so-called “city sealings”, referred to as such because they bear the names of Mesopotamian cities; these seal impressions, dating to the Jemdet Nasr and Early Dynastic I periods, are found on tablets as well as on doors and mobile containers.<sup>24</sup> No actual city seals have been found, although they must, of course, have existed. By Early Dynastic III times,<sup>25</sup> there was an explosion of writing on other media, including stone and shell cylinder seals; stone plaques, stelae and statues; stone, copper/bronze and silver vessels; and metal weapons. As the material basis of writing expanded, so, too, did the need to (learn to) produce cuneiform signs on other kinds of materials with very different properties.

What did this extension of media—different materials as well as different kinds of objects—imply in terms of the skills, knowledge, and social interactions among artisans and their consequences for the craftpersons themselves? Forming and manipulating clay involved a set of skills that had been long and widely practiced by the time writing first appeared, ranging from making mudbricks to fashioning pottery, figurines, and an array of other small objects. There was a substantial knowledge base surely shared by many people, including an intimate familiarity with the properties and possibilities of clay as a material. The use of clay tablets as a medium on which to write involved specific temporal considerations: the necessity to incise (for the earliest “proto-cuneiform”) or impress (for subsequent forms of writing) written signs into the moist clay before it dried to a point where this was no longer possible. Taylor and Cartwright suggest that tablet surfaces may have dried beyond usability in as little as an hour, unless they were covered with damp cloths to slow the drying process.<sup>26</sup> This temporal constraint meant that a scribe had a limited window of time in which to inscribe the tablet, even if it were prolonged to some extent by the use of cloth coverings. This does not in itself differ from other things made of clay, except insofar as writing was a more complex process that required more time to produce than the rolling or stamping of a seal. The scribe would also have needed to develop the bodily skills and a certain *Augenmaß*<sup>27</sup> that would have allowed him or her to

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<sup>24</sup> Matthews 1993, 30–41.

<sup>25</sup> I do not wish to enter here into the complexities of chronological arguments about whether it is possible to distinguish an Early Dynastic II period.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor/Cartwright 2011, 311.

<sup>27</sup> “Visual judgment”.

space the signs appropriately, leaving enough room to accommodate the full complement in the space available.

What becomes particularly interesting is the extension of writing from clay to other materials, already probably underway within a century or two of the invention of writing but something that took on much greater dimensions sometime around the mid-third millennium BCE. As already mentioned, no examples of city seals are attested that correspond to the known city *sealings*. The absence of seals might indicate that they were made of a less durable material, as already suggested by Roger Matthews who has proposed wood as a likely material.<sup>28</sup> The rationale for suggesting wood is indirect, based on the fineness of the carving, rather than the identification of any traces of wood grain. If instead the seals were made of baked clay—a suggestion for which there is also no direct evidence—it would imply putting together material and form in a novel combination—clay was already in use as a medium for writing, but the form was quite different (tablets), whereas cylinder seals had been made and used for several centuries, but not to write.

Be that as it may, by the Early Dynastic III period, writing is found on stone, shell, and metal, on cylinder seals, plaques, vessels, stelae, and statues. These extensions to different materials in turn required different sets of skills. The use of stone, the most commonly attested class of inscribed materials apart from clay, would have entailed learning to chisel signs into a hard surface<sup>29</sup> rather than impressing them into a soft one. This, in turn, involved a substantially different set of motor skills and familiarity with material properties and tools.<sup>30</sup> In the case of seals, it would also have meant an ability to produce a mirror image of the signs that were to appear once rolled. Carving intaglio in stone had been practiced as long as seals had been in use—several millennia by the time writing began—but doing so in mirror image was likely not a widely practiced skill. Most if not all seal designs prior to the beginnings of inscriptions on seals would probably not have appeared “wrong”, even if the seal cutter had carved the design in the same way as s/he wished it to appear when stamped or rolled, i.e. not in mirror image. This would not work for inscriptions. That carving a mirror image of the desired product was sometimes unintentionally misconceived can be seen in the case of an early third millennium city sealing in which the signs are in reverse of their normal orientation and order.<sup>31</sup>

Did scribes learn to write in mirror image and in stone when inscriptions began to be used on seals? If so, they would also have had to learn to write on a highly curved object rather than on the typically “pillow-shaped” surface of a tablet. Or did seal cutters learn to write? Perhaps scribes provided drawings of inscriptions that were

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<sup>28</sup> Matthews 1993, 18.

<sup>29</sup> How hard would, of course, depend on the type of stone.

<sup>30</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1943.

<sup>31</sup> Matthews 1993, 30.

then transferred by seal cutters to their overall designs in the reverse? If so, in what material were the drawings made? While these questions cannot be answered definitively, the occurrence of seals in the ED III period with carefully delineated panels for inscriptions that were never filled<sup>32</sup> points to the incorporation of writing as a separate and later step in the production process. This could mean that seals were made in advance and stored until a commission was received, but it might just as well be an indication that the seal cutter and the producer of the inscription were not necessarily the same person and that the incorporation of an inscription could happen much later than the cutting of the image. It also means that the inclusion of an inscription was planned together with the overall design, even if in the end it was not always realized.

The incorporation of writing onto plaques, stelae, and sculptures did not require the ability to conceive of the written word as a mirror image, but the same familiarization with stone and the transference of writing to it were required. Inscriptions on stone plaques tend to be scattered throughout the scene, as if placed there as an afterthought,<sup>33</sup> quite unlike the carefully set apart panels on seals. The lengthy text on the Stele of the Vultures was added after the carving of the imagery, and while text and imagery deal with the same basic themes, they do not correspond in an exact way.<sup>34</sup> These distinctions suggest more than just a different aesthetic or compositional approach; rather, they tell us something about the degree to which written elements were part of the initial conception of an object along with the imagery.

Along with the extension of writing from clay to stone (and shell<sup>35</sup>) came another set of changes related to the move from a “neutral” technology that involved impressing shapes onto a surface to a subtractive one. While mistakes on clay tablets were not necessarily easy to erase, it was possible to do so;<sup>36</sup> in the case of a mistaken carving on a cylinder seal, there was no way to hide it other than to cut further, changing both the surface and the size of the cylinder.

Regardless of who made the inscriptions on seals or other stone objects, the extensions of writing from tablets to other media involved a transfer of skills and knowledge between artisans<sup>37</sup> and across media. This kind of transference is neither simple nor automatic, as has been demonstrated in the work of archaeologists who have

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**32** For example, among the seals from the Royal Cemetery of Ur: U. 8615, U. 10823, U. 10872 (Woolley 1934, pls. 193:18, 194:27, 29), and in the Diyala: #320, #335 (Frankfort 1955, pls. 32, 33).

**33** See, for example, Boese 1971, Tafel XVII.1, XVIII.1, XXIX.1,2.

**34** Winter 1985.

**35** Cylinder seals made of shell are relatively common in the ED III period; they occasionally bore inscriptions.

**36** Taylor 2011, 19; Taylor/Cartwright 2011, 310–313.

**37** I include scribes under the category of artisans, as they likely shaped their own tablets, even if they did not engage in the full range of activities involved in tablet production. See Taylor/Cartwright 2011, Whitehouse 2013.

explored cross-craft interactions.<sup>38</sup> In the case of writing, either the scribe was confronted with new materials, requiring new tools and bodily gestures, or a new group of people—cylinder seal cutters—had to learn to reproduce written signs, although not necessarily to write in the sense of acquiring active literacy. This latter option may have opened up a new form of partial literacy (see below) and would involve delegation of a portion of the task of writing to a group of artisans who had not previously been involved with it.

## 5 From the Medium to the Message<sup>39</sup>

Unbaked clay tablets may in some cases have been recycled, given the fact that tablet clay was typically finely levigated and would have required a considerable amount of time and effort in preparation; nonetheless, a careful consideration of potential cases and methods of reusing clay tablets suggests that the practice of recycling was more limited than one might think.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, tablets might simply be discarded, as suggested by the find-spots of the Uruk Archaic Texts, which were part of the rubble used to level the Eanna precinct in preparation for further building activities. How long after their production this occurred is an open question,<sup>41</sup> but their content hints that most were meant as short-term accounting records. Only in rare circumstances were clay tablets baked,<sup>42</sup> providing another testimony to the short-lived nature, relatively speaking, of the recorded information.

With the incorporation of stone as a writing medium in later Early Dynastic times, not just the medium changes but also the message. The use of stone involved an increasing permanence of that which was written in comparison to a clay tablet.

Stone requires no transformation to be durable on a “permanent” basis;<sup>43</sup> indeed, unlike metals or clay, the only rapid way to transform stone is subtractive. Rather than requiring care to preserve (for example, not exposing clay tablets to water), it needs effort to destroy stone, by chiseling, hammering, or chipping parts away. In this respect writing on stone brings with it intrinsic claims to duration of the inscribed text—as well as that which was shaped and depicted—that writing on a clay tablet

<sup>38</sup> See in particular Brysbaert 2008, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> McLuhan 1964.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor/Cartwright 2011.

<sup>41</sup> See Nissen 2002, 6–7.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor/Cartwright 2011, 300.

<sup>43</sup> There is, of course, no truly permanent, in the sense of fully unalterable material, but stone that is not exposed to constant water flow or other highly erosive processes undergoes only minor changes over long periods of time in comparison to many other commonly used materials in antiquity, such as clay, bone, and other organic substances.

does not.<sup>44</sup> To take just one example, it is hardly surprising that statuary of a king or royal stelae, such as the Stele of the Vultures, that name kings and recount their deeds were made of stone, emphasizing their long-lasting characteristics, rather than of clay. This was not only a matter of the “costliness” of stone, especially of the kinds that were not locally available within the alluvial lowlands, but also of the characteristics of a material that required particular kinds of artisanal skills to create, had a certain aesthetic value, and exuded a permanence that could not be claimed for clay.<sup>45</sup>

The use of stone as a medium for writing brought not only greater permanence but was also accompanied by a change in *what* was written, both on stone and on clay. Whereas earlier tablets consisted primarily of short-term accounts, by ED III times there is a proliferation of new genres: temple hymns, wisdom texts (such as “Instructions of Shuruppak”), proverbs, incantations, and narrative texts (such as “Lugalbanda and Ninsun”).<sup>46</sup> This was an extension of writing beyond the sphere of the almost purely economic and the realm of accounting to one of ritual and related knowledge. By writing it down, this knowledge was preserved for the future in a form that was more fixed than in oral transmission, an important step in the transition from what Assmann has referred to as communicative to cultural memory.<sup>47</sup> Again it is surely no coincidence that it is in the mid-third millennium that there are the first clear indications of the archiving of (some) tablets. There is also a clear development in terms of inscriptions on stone cylinder seals. Early Dynastic seal inscriptions usually consist of a name, alone or with the addition of a title or profession. These attributes were presumably intended to be stable over a relatively long period of time, in many cases a (working) lifetime. Interestingly, the inscriptions point to a personalization of the seals: there are to my knowledge none that have titles or professions *without* a personal name.<sup>48</sup> This stands in contrast to Nissen’s hypothesis for the Late Uruk period<sup>49</sup> in which he proposes that some seals were meant to designate offices rather than specific holders of those positions.

In Sargonic and later times, seal inscriptions occur more frequently and often incorporate patronymics as well as the patron—an official or deity—and bearer of the seal, again relationships that had pretensions to being long-lasting, regardless of whether or not they were so in fact. In addition to the increasing number of inscribed examples, seals also appear more often in graves beginning in ED III times but espe-

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<sup>44</sup> One can, of course, see this as part of a longer-term process, in which writing on clay made that which was written much longer-lasting than it was prior to the existence of such a recording technology.

<sup>45</sup> Even when baked, ceramic objects are more easily breakable than stone.

<sup>46</sup> Biggs 1974, 28–32, 79–97; Krebernik 1998, 317–325; Krebernik/Postgate 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Assmann 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Woolley 1934; Jacobsen in Frankfort 1955.

<sup>49</sup> Nissen 1977.

cially from the Sargonic period.<sup>50</sup> Again, this may be understood as an increasing tendency to associate a specific person with a particular seal, which was then supposed to accompany her/him into death.

Other inscribed stone objects show related patterns. Stone plaques carved in low relief, often referred to as votive plaques, may include personal names and professions, dedicatory inscriptions to a deity, as well as reports of building activities.<sup>51</sup> Stelae and sculpture include names and dedications as well as land claims and commemorations of military victories.

All of these inscriptions in stone can be understood as gestures toward a future that went beyond that of writing on clay tablets. In this respect, the material (stone), the visual and the written contents worked hand-in-hand. Objects such as stelae and sculpture may have been intended to stand in the temple or in a public place; in the case of seals, they might be taken with a person to the grave.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, clay tablets were neither put on public display nor are they found in graves. The gesture toward the future, characterized by writing on stone, can be connected to Reinhard Koselleck's notion that an orientation toward the future entails expectations, an *Erwartungshorizont*, that is not solely based on prior experience (*Erfahrungsraum*).<sup>53</sup> While Koselleck considers this kind of openness to an unpredictable future to be an invention of modernity, I would argue that one can discern tendencies in that direction at other points in history, such as in the one of concern here.

## 6 Mechanical Reproduction

Cylinder seals have another characteristic that plays a role here as well. As has also been noted by other observers,<sup>54</sup> the scenes carved into them can be reproduced more or less *ad infinitum*—they are in some ways the ancient equivalent of the mechanical reproduction that both interested and worried Walter Benjamin in the early 20th century.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, by rolling a seal over a medium such as moist clay, it was possible for a seal bearer to produce something written without actually being able to write. If writing in contexts where few people were literate conferred a sense of power, this ability to create something written simply through the rolling of a seal would have been no small matter. An object, potentially inscribed by a non-literate seal cutter,

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**50** See especially the Royal Cemetery of Ur (Woolley 1934) and graves in the Diyala region (Delougaz/Hill/Lloyd 1967).

**51** Boese 1971.

**52** In pre-ED II/III times seals were only very occasionally included as grave goods.

**53** Koselleck 1985.

**54** Charvát 2005, 282–283.

**55** Benjamin 1963; Pollock (in press).

was used by a potentially non-literate official to “write”, thereby transforming a person into what one might argue to be a kind of pseudo-literate subject.

One can add nuance to this picture by hypothesizing a differential distribution of active and passive literacy, with active literacy referring to the ability to write and passive literacy to the capacity to read.<sup>56</sup> Seals, whether they bear inscriptions or not, function as a kind of mould for creating serial products, the sealings.<sup>57</sup> If one had use of a seal, whether as an individual or in the capacity of an officeholder, this was the equivalent of being in possession of a prototype used in reproduction of the imagery carved into the seal. In the case of inscribed seals, the prototype allowed the person with the seal to produce something written, regardless of whether she or he was in fact actively literate. It is possible that the inscriptions on the serial products (sealings), which were more widely distributed than the prototype (seals), could be read by a larger group of people whose passive literacy skills were adequate to recognize some basic sign combinations. Although this must remain a matter of conjecture, this thought experiment points to specific potentials for the ways that interactions between things and people may have produced kinds of subjects whose skills and social positioning were thereby newly defined.

## 7 Conclusion

I have tried to show some of the ways in which the incorporation of multiple materials and skills into objects were the products of relationships between people and things and in turn had consequences for those relationships. The use of stone as a new and highly durable medium for writing brought with it and/or was prompted by a number of significant changes: (1) the skills required for the act of writing had to be adapted, and some degree of cross-craft interaction was likely essential at least at the beginning; (2) inscriptions took on a degree of permanence that up until that time does not seem to have been of much importance; and (3) with the use of more permanent materials came a change in that which was written, both on stone and on clay: one might hazard the suggestion that it was the material that changed the content, rather than the other way around.<sup>58</sup>

As Daniel Miller has noted with reference to the work of Erving Goffman, the less we are aware of objects, the more powerful they are: they determine our expectations and set the scene, but when we are unaware of this, the process is not open to chal-

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<sup>56</sup> Brooks 2010.

<sup>57</sup> It is, of course, the case that seals may also have been prized as elements of bodily adornment, for example, in addition to being used to impress sealings.

<sup>58</sup> McLuhan 1964.

lenge.<sup>59</sup> This, I would suggest, offers a potential place for positive intervention: by raising awareness, we can reopen doxic situations to questioning and thereby address the ways in which the material worlds we contribute to making subjectivize us.

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