Review Article

Toward a Usable Archival Past: Recent Studies in the History of Literacy

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Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307.* Second Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993). ISBN-0-631-17823-6; $59.95.

Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). ISBN-0-691-10227-9; $29.95.

Rosamund McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). ISBN-0-521-30539-X; $69.95.

Rosamund McKitterick, ed., *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). ISBN-0-521-34409-3; $59.50.

Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). ISBN-0-521-37346-8; $54.95.

William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). ISBN-0-674-03380-9; $35.00.

IF THE STUDY OF HISTORY is useful—readers of this journal probably think it is, but that may be a minority opinion in society at large—it is because history allows us to find contingency and change in a world we otherwise perceive as fixed and necessary. Seeing the variety of options that human society has had in the past and the conscious and unconscious ways in which choices were made helps disabuse us of the notion that present arrangements of the world were at all inevitable. The assertion that anything has "always been this way" cannot stand in the face of the ongoing historical enterprise.

This is as true for professional activity as it is for life in general. As practitioners of what the Library of Congress classification system calls an "auxiliary science of history," archivists more than others should recognize that the way they do their own jobs had by no means to turn out as it has. The history of the profession is therefore directly relevant to current professional practice, but not enough work has been done in English on archival history,

whether of the remote or more recent past. At some point in their early specialized education, many archivists are exposed to a handful of classics in the genre; some may even read them! Ernst Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World* and his essays on the history of continental European archival practice have had the field pretty much to themselves.[1] Encountering these works, archivists may develop a false sense of security, thinking that they now know what they need to know about the origins of their profession.

We are beginning to appreciate that we have only scratched the surface, however, and one of the people responsible for opening the history of archives to new study has been Michael T. Clanchy of University College London. The appearance in 1979 of his *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* marked an important turning point for archival history, even though that was not the focus of the study. Clanchy described how one particular society, that of Norman England, came to make the transition from a reliance on oral discourse and human memory as the means for preserving important information to a reliance on written documentation. The questions he posed sought to delineate the broader cultural meaning of the technology and psychology of writing in a place and time where they were still new. What were the level and extent of literacy? Who knew how to read and write, and how did they acquire those abilities? What was the relationship between reading and writing, two skills that seem necessarily linked in the modern world but which developed along very different tracks? To what uses was writing put? How did society at large—those who could *not* write as well as those who could—agree to rely on writing to accomplish important communal tasks?[2]

Clanchy's work became something of a cult classic among archivists in North America. Although the book was not reviewed in the *American Archivist* and got only a brief notice in *Archivaria*, by the middle 1980s references to it began to show up in journal articles and in papers presented at professional meetings. Clanchy himself published an essay in *Archivaria* summarizing its evidence and conclusions. Archivists began to recognize the importance of his study for understanding what might be called the pre-history of their profession.[3] At the very least, they tacitly acknowledged that, had the transition from memory to written record not occurred, there would have been no archival

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[1]Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972). Several of Posner's studies on the history of European archival practice are compiled in Ken Munden, editor, *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays of Ernst Posner* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967). See also Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983); Richard J. Cox, "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983): 31–41; and James M. O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), chapter 2 ("The History of Archives and the Archives Profession").

[2]M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). This first edition was also published simultaneously by Edward Arnold Ltd. of London.

[3]M. T. Clanchy, "Archives and Memory in the Middle Ages," *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980–1981): 115–25; *From Memory to Written Record* had been reviewed in *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979–1980): 234–35, by Hugh Taylor. The first formal citation to the book I have been able to identify by an archivist in the U.S. was in Clark Elliott, "Communication and Events in History," *American Archivist* 48 (Fall 1985): 359, note 10. Occasionally, reviews of related works did appear in archival journals. Elizabeth Eisenstein's massive but controversial work, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Social Change: Communication and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe,* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), was reviewed in *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 157–58, and two works on discoveries at the archives at Ebla were reviewed there in 46 (Winter 1983): 82–83.

profession as we know it. More broadly, they came to realize that there was a good deal more to say than had previously been said about the origins of archives, the literate and bureaucratic revolutions that called them into being, and the roles of records in society.

Clanchy's first edition encouraged a lively discussion among historians, anthropologists, and philosophers, a scholarly interest that resulted in the publication of a number of important studies in the 1980s and 1990s.[4] Now comes a second edition of *From Memory to Written Record,* a third again as long as the original, with a completely updated bibliography and new treatments of several important subjects. Its appearance provides the occasion to look again at some of these newer studies of literacy in history and to think about their implications for archivists.

From Memory to Written Record, Second Edition

Like the original, Clanchy's new edition is readable and rich; archivists will find matters of interest on virtually every page. He sets a foundation for his discussion by describing the evolving technology of writing and the types of documents produced.[5] The materials used, the relative costs of those materials and of the production of records (until fairly recent times, writing

something down was an expensive proposition), the development of particular styles of handwriting, the layout and format of documents, and the various kinds of records in use all receive careful consideration. Even modern archivists who will never encounter charters, chirographs, writs, chronicles, cartularies, or liturgical manuscripts in their own collections will find these discussions informative, not just for their factual detail but also for their systematic way of approaching the raw "stuff" of archives. In an era like our own, when we are reminded daily that the technology of recordmaking is undergoing rapid and dramatic change, we can find many parallels and insights in the development of records in the Middle Ages. Is it too much to believe that the way we think about preserving important information hidden in millions of e-mail messages can be informed by understanding how medieval England came to embody land transfers and interpersonal agreements in written charters and indentures?

Only gradually did it dawn on medieval administrators that documents could actually be used for practical purposes. This may come as a surprise to many archivists, who are accustomed to thinking that administrative usefulness has always been the hallmark of recordmaking and recordkeeping. Clanchy's revision of the received archival wisdom is most apparent and most telling here. Even so detailed a record as the Domesday Book, packed as it was with information about precedent, finances, land ownership, and legal obligations, was not initially thought to have much practical value: more than two centuries elapsed before the thought became common that one could—or, more to the point, *would*—consult it for particular bits of information which might be useful. The idea that royal or church bureaucracies, such as they were, would make and save mundane administrative documents for future reference emerged very slowly. Not until the end of the

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[4]Besides the historical studies reviewed here and works like them, see the contributions from other disciplines as well, such as those of Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982) is, in this reviewer's opinion, the best one-volume introduction to the philosophical issues involved here. Readers should be aware that Ong's work is controversial, however, and has been explicitly challenged by many subsequent writers.

[5]See especially chapters 2 ("The Proliferation of Documents"), 3 ("Types of Record"), and 4 ("The Technology of Writing").

twelfth century, well over one hundred years after the Conquest, was there a systematic effort to keep records of judicial proceedings, and it was another century after that before any kind of administrative continuity through documentation was thought important enough to justify the bother. The first deliberate attempt in England to locate information in a collection of records for the purpose of bringing it to bear on a current issue seems to have been Edward I's search of documents in 1291 to prove his overlordship of Scotland.[6] (He was unable to find what he was looking for, by the way, thereby becoming perhaps the first dissatisfied archival researcher.) In 1184, Pope Lucius III had expressed both a similar frustration and a sense that records could be as problematic as they were helpful: "Because of the mass of business which is referred to the Apostolic See, we cannot possibly remember the tenor of our letters. . . . For this reason we may be tricked into contradicting what we have written earlier."[7]

The development of what we would consider fundamental tasks in the control of archives and records is also described here. The methods that emerged were largely unplanned, messy, and seldom proceeded in a straightforward manner. It is only after one decides to consult records again long after they are made that questions of their organization and cataloging become important. In the halfway world between orality and literacy, means for retrieving information were complex and highly articulated, though they may look somewhat arbitrary to us. Methods for recalling information by indexing it in the mind's eye overlapped with primitive means of performing the same tasks on paper, and Clanchy provides examples of early subject classifications and union catalogs.[8] Deciding which topic a given document was about—indeed, deciding that it was "about" anything—required an important mental shift.[9] As archivists of today try to design ever more complete and "user-friendly" indexing systems, especially in automated formats, we have much to learn from seeing how other cultures have, *mutatis mutandis,* faced the same dilemma.

By far the most important subject here, however, is the matter of how the people of Norman England came to trust records to accomplish tasks that had been done without writing for centuries. Clanchy states the problem succinctly: "People had to be persuaded—and it was difficult to do—that documentary proof was a sufficient improvement on existing methods to merit the extra expense and novel techniques which it demanded."[10] Because we ourselves live in such an overwhelmingly literate world, one in which these problems are considered settled, we may underestimate the magnitude of the change this involved. Imagine the problem of going into court to prove a point at issue and having to say to the judge, in effect, "Well, no, I don't have any witnesses to back me up. But I do have this flimsy animal skin with some black marks on it." A literate judge

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[6]See Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, second edition, 152–53. The principal discussion of Domesday is on pp. 32–35. Though Clanchy disagrees with some of its interpretations, Elizabeth M. Hallam's *Domesday Book Through Nine Centuries* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986) is still a useful survey history from the great book's compilation to the present.

[7]Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record,* second edition, 183.

[8]The whole question of the technique and cultural significance of memory is another area in which archivists' reading might well be updated. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), remains the classic starting point, but for a more detailed recent treatment, see Mary Carruthers's excellent *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[9]See Clanchy's discussion of remembering and indexing, pp. 172–84.

[10]Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record,* second edition, 294.

might be willing to accept such a document under certain conditions, but convincing nonliterate judges, jurors, and disputants would probably be more difficult. The move toward reposing trust in records took a long time, and the documents themselves had to evolve in format and substance before they could be fully credited. Reliable and precise systems for dating records, the signing of documents, the use of seals and crosses (these latter evidence that a Christian signatory was literally swearing before God to a record's truth), and methods of detecting forgeries—all these contributed to a growing sense that records were indeed as trustworthy as, and maybe more trustworthy than, oral testimony.[11] In this way, Clanchy argues, the spread of documents may actually have preceded widespread literacy, rather than the other way around. This seems contrary to common sense, but we find a similar phenomenon in our own times: the proliferation of computers comes before, not after, computer literacy itself.

Clanchy's comprehensive discussion also treats a number of other important subjects. Like many historians of literacy, he must try to explain how the skills of reading and writing were acquired, particularly in a society in which formal schooling was still rare. He believes that lay women played the crucial role in this: motivated by religious piety, they themselves learned to read so they could use books of hours and other devotional works, and they then taught this skill to their children, male and female. (Indeed, Clanchy's full-length study of this topic, *Women and the Book in the Middle Ages,* is now forthcoming from Blackwell.) Prompted by some of those who studied literacy after the appearance of his first edition, he now considers more fully the complicated problem of writing in languages other than Latin

(especially French, English, and Hebrew), and he also accounts for the survival of preliterate, oral patterns—the persistence of writing, in the sense of "composing," as dictation, for example—even as written documents were proliferating. For the fullness of consideration of these and other subjects, all archivists, even those who think they know Clanchy through the first edition of *From Memory to Written Record,* should read him again in this updated and expanded version.

Implications of Literacy

The historiographical interest that the earlier edition helped inspire has moved the study of literacy beyond England in the two and a half centuries after the Norman Conquest and has led several scholars to examine other places and times. One of the first to do so was Brian Stock, whose *Implications of Literacy* broadened the focus to medieval Europe as a whole. Stock's approach is that of good old-fashioned intellectual history, and following the argument is thus not for the faint of heart. In considering the larger implications of the transition to literacy, however, he combines a solid understanding of particular events with a detailed analysis of their importance and meaning.

Stock begins from the premise that, before the year 1000, oral and written traditions coexisted on more or less equal terms on the continent, but that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries a transformation of great significance, a "rebirth of literacy," occurred. It was not a simple question of literacy supplanting orality; rather, what mattered was the emergence of a new relationship between them. Oral methods of communication retained their force, but increasingly they functioned in a world governed by written texts. Oral testimony in law courts, for instance, still occupied a central place, but written statutes, evidence, and precedents provided the superstructure

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[11]The entire discussion of this question is in chapter 9 ("Trusting Writing").

on which orality operated. Proof and validity took on distinctly literate meanings. Writing came to be seen as determinative in more and more aspects of life, and literate forms of thinking dominated even in the absence of particular texts. Literacy thus acquired a newly expanded range and applicability in human affairs. Personal and psychological changes were not far behind: abstraction and categorization were now possible on a scale that had previously been difficult at best, and people even began to "live texts" by writing down and thereby inevitably editing their own experience.[12]

The bulk of Stock's analysis is devoted to a series of case studies which show these shifts in various aspects of medieval life: social organization, ritual practice, developments in philosophy and intellectual life. He makes his case most clearly, perhaps, in his discussion of both orthodox and heretical theology. The growth of administrative structures that involved writing—such as papal and royal chanceries, together with lay notariates—provided a basis for the wider diffusion of texts in society, but literacy once unleashed showed the disquieting tendency to spread over its original boundaries. The devout wanted to gather oral stories from the lives of the saints, for instance, and to set them down in writing for the edification of people remote in time or distance. Almost immediately, however, it became clear that this was not an unambiguous process: which pious stories got left in, and which ones were omitted? Even worse, if the orthodox could use literacy to spread one message, the heterodox could likewise use it to spread another one altogether. "Heresy" thus took on a new meaning and a new interpretive reality, one governed largely by the way all sides in disputes wrote about it.[13] "Textual com-

munities" thus emerged, and no aspect of life that humans considered important was excluded from them.

Stock does not rely explicitly on the work of the philosopher Walter Ong, who argued that literacy represented a fundamental shift in human mentality; even so, he may fairly be characterized as a "neo-Ongian."[14] As medieval society worked out new arrangements between orality and literacy, the mind itself began to operate in new ways, Stock says, if only because it found that it could. This debate—that the literate mind is/is not essentially different from the oral mind—is a complex one and has yet to be satisfactorily concluded. The evidence and argument Stock presents, however, tend to support the view that literate ways of thinking and behaving are indeed different from oral ways. Regardless of one's view of this question, archivists are largely the products of a "victory" of literacy over orality, and their own mental world is governed by it. Self-awareness alone requires that they try to achieve some understanding of it. Stock's prose is much more dense than Clanchy's, and reading his work therefore requires dedication. The reader's perseverance is rewarded, however, and an enlarged perspective on the intellectual foundations of modern civilization emerges from his wide-ranging treatment.

Carolingians and the Written Word

Closer to Clanchy's original mark, and more approachable than Stock, is Rosamund McKitterick's move across the Channel and back in time. Her *Carolin-*

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[12]Stock provides a concise summary of his thesis on pp. 3–11.

[13]The discussion of heresy is on pp. 145–51.

[14]Ong's views on this subject are elaborated in his *Orality and Literacy*. See especially his contrast of pre-literate, Homeric Greece, a world in which "knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost," with the literate world of Plato, in which the storage of knowledge in writing "freed the mind for more original, more abstract thought"; page 24.

gians and the Written Word does for the continent in the eighth and ninth centuries what Clanchy had done for the England of two hundred and fifty years later. In the Carolingian kingdoms, McKitterick finds a perfect model for studying the emergence of literate culture. There, writing was being exploited for a host of new purposes, and the rapid development of both an educational system and the organization of knowledge only reinforced literacy's power. By studying the various manifestations of the written word in Carolingian society, McKitterick explores attitudes toward books, records, and writing in general. Because she is working in an earlier period, she opens the way for exploration of the continuities between medieval literacy and that of late antiquity. Finally, by looking at the geographic boundaries among spoken and written languages—who spoke and wrote what where?—she prepares the field for a more nuanced discussion of the interplay of Latin and the various vernaculars.

The operation of literacy in law and administration provides an obvious starting point, since much of the surviving evidence comes from those aspects of society. McKitterick relies on a particularly rich collection of more than eight hundred charters, dated roughly between 700 and 920, from the region around the monastery of St. Gall in present-day Switzerland. Literacy was well established there, if somewhat fluid, as older scripts coexisted with emerging new ones. These charters (which are preserved in their entirety, not just in the cartulary summaries that are more common elsewhere) also seem to indicate a lack of precise specialization in writing, with literate skills and the making of records dispersed widely in society at large. "The old view of the literate clergy and monks superior to an illiterate population cannot be sustained," she argues. "We are, rather, dealing with a literate community, in which many degrees of literacy and its

uses are represented."[15] The pattern of development is not always what one might expect, however: as time went on, the number of local, lay scribes declined, and the monastery increasingly consolidated its position as a producer of documents. This suggests that some Roman patterns of literacy had endured, at least for a while, but that the "progress" of society from nonliteracy to literacy was not always linear or even permanent.

Like Clanchy, McKitterick takes a broad view of the cultural meaning of literacy. She begins with a very helpful discussion of the economics of book production and use. The surviving evidence on this topic is always maddeningly sparse, but she skillfully teases out comparative conclusions from the available data: about 835, for example, one book containing Lombard laws and a fragment of a saint's life sold for an amount equivalent to ninety-six two-pound loaves of bread.[16] Such astronomical prices were obviously linked to the substantial costs of production, and together these economic dynamics made books valuable objects. "I have been afraid to send you Bede's *Collectanea*," one bibliophile wrote another in 858, "because the book is so large that it cannot be concealed on one's person. . . . One would have to fear an attack of robbers, who would certainly be attracted by the beauty of the book, and it would therefore probably be lost to both you and me." The jump from those monetary values to other values, psychological and cultural, was a short one, as McKitterick's discussion of books as art objects and treasured gifts makes clear. Spiritual value complemented material value, and the possession of books and

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[15]McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word*, 126; see her examination of this collection in chapter 3 ("A Literate Community: The Evidence of the Charters").

[16]McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word*, 136–37.

other writings became clearly indicative of wealth and status.[17]

Archivists will also be informed by McKitterick's discussion of the emerging procedures for the control and organization of knowledge in this period. From the earliest lists of manuscripts and rough inventories of book collections—precisely when it is correct to start using the term *library* is unclear—the arrangement and cataloging of writings was increasingly necessary and increasingly systematic. One monastery developed a classification schema grouped around such general headings as scripture and theology, practical knowledge such as law and medicine, ritual and liturgical books, grammars, and other school books, with a chronological arrangement inside each one. Another attempted a kind of hierarchical expression of the importance of various branches of knowledge: biblical books first, the commentaries of the church fathers next, and so on down to spelling and arithmetic at the end. Despite its common use in antiquity, alphabetical order was surprisingly infrequent, though other forms for guidebooks and bibliographic aids did develop.[18] Such methods not only served to describe and maintain control over one's own holdings; they also helped diffuse throughout the literate culture a sense of what a well-stocked storehouse of information *ought* to contain. Thus, expectations for what written knowledge could accomplish and how it could be used increased, further reinforcing the role of literacy in the operations of society.

The Uses of Literacy

In addition to her monographic treatment of the Carolingian period, McKitterick has also edited *The Uses of Literacy,* a fine collection of essays which focus on the early Middle Ages. This is a period that other historians have treated insufficiently or even minimized (by Stock, for instance) as being not very important. By "early," she and her coauthors mean the time from about 400 to about 1000 C.E., and they also significantly extend the geographical and cultural territory under scrutiny. The essays encompass everything from Byzantium in the east to frontier Ireland in the west, and they look at Visigothic and Arab Spain and at continental Jewish literacy as well as the roles of writing and documents in the dominant Christian culture. All highlight a similar theme: "Literacy in any society is not just a matter of who could read and write, but one of how their skills function, and of the adjustments—mental, emotional, intellectual, physical, and technological—necessary to accommodate it."[19]

Several essays in particular stand out. Thomas F. X. Noble's "Literacy and the Papal Government in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages" is a detailed study of the role of the emerging papal monarchy and its administrative apparatus in promoting the development of recordkeeping.[20] Noble finds that many of Clanchy's conclusions about Norman England do not apply to Italy. The papacy, he says, was an important agent of continuity with the literacy of the late imperial period, as church administrators took over Roman structures and methods. He describes the many types of documents that the church produced, and he finds the early papacy strongly committed to the making and preserving of records for ongoing administrative purposes. At the same time, he points out the many public uses of documents: authors of saints' lives and other devotional works as well as ecclesiastical officials consulted ar-

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[17]McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word,* 135, 164.

[18]McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word,* 179–85, 197–98.

[19]McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word,* 5.

[20]Noble, in *The Uses of Literacy,* 82–108.

chives for their own purposes. As early as
Innocent I (401–417), popes were making
reference to previous documents in issuing
newer ones, and Saint Jerome (died 420),
when challenged on a particular point of
doctrinal interpretation, retorted that any-
one who doubted what he said could look
it up "in Romana Ecclesiae chartario."
And, of course, books and other writings
played important liturgical roles in evolv-
ing church ceremonies.

Two essays focus on what might be
called the art of literacy, what writing ac-
tually looked like and how it was perceived
by those who encountered it. John Mitch-
ell's "Literacy Displayed" studies the art-
istry of writing in a ninth-century Italian
monastery and finds a rich texture of mean-
ing. Painted figures holding legible texts;
gravestone inscriptions of various kinds;
inscribed floor tiles in the compound's
principal rooms and corridors; letters
carved into stone and then filled in with
gilded metal so as to attract the eye—all
these meant that literacy and its evocative
and devotional uses were omnipresent.[21]
McKitterick herself contributes an essay on
this same theme, describing a number of
features of "text as image" in Carolingian
book illumination. She notes the hierar-
chies of script in common use: plain block
capital letters were preferred for reproduc-
ing classical and nonChristian texts, for ex-
ample, while the rounded and elaborate
uncial script was thought more appropriate
for liturgical books. She also describes
(sadly, there are no illustrations) cases of
letters arranged so as to form pictures of
their own, and she discusses the persistent
use of certain literacy-related images, such
as the Book of Life of the Apocalypse.[22]

Finally, several of these essays are par-

ticularly welcome for their treatment of
vernacular literacy, not just literacy in
Latin. Most of the cultures considered here
had literate traditions which long antedated
the dominance of Latinity. Ireland had a
fixed vernacular literary structure and a
standardized orthography by the end of the
sixth century, and even the laity in Anglo-
Saxon England were widely literate—
many of them, perforce, were bilingual—
in the eighth century. In both places Latin
literacy, once introduced, advanced as
quickly as it did because it could build on
these vernacular foundations.[23] Outside the
dominant European culture, educators in
other traditions—Jews and Arabs, for ex-
ample—had and retained their own highly
developed literate ways. Stefan Reif, de-
scribes the religious foundations for Jewish
literacy, which was supported by an inde-
pendent educational system, and the wide-
spread trilingualism (Hebrew, Aramaic,
and Arabic) in Jewish society.[24] All of
these studies challenge the easy and too-
common assumption that medieval literacy
necessarily meant Latin literacy, revealing
instead a more complex picture.

Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece

By extending the study back to the early
Middle Ages, McKitterick's book suggests
the necessity of examining these issues in
the ancient world, and two recent volumes
are particularly helpful in this regard. The
more specialized is Rosalind Thomas's *Lit-
eracy and Orality in Ancient Greece.* Many
earlier scholars had already explored the
significance of the coming of writing to

[21]"Literacy Displayed: The Use of Inscriptions at
the Monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno in the
Early Ninth Century," 186–225.
[22]McKitterick, "Text and Image in the Carolingian
World," 297–318.

[23]Jane Stevenson, "Literacy in Ireland: The Evi-
dence of the Patrick Dossier in the Book of Armagh,"
11–35; Susan Kelly, "Anglo-Saxon Lay Society and
the Written Word," 36–62.
[24]Stefan C. Reif, "Aspects of Medieval Jewish Lit-
eracy," 134–55. See also the discussion of literacy in
the multicultural crossroads that was Spain: Roger
Collins, "Literacy and the Laity in Early Medieval
Spain," 109–33.

Greece.[25] It was there, after all, that the alphabet, a distinctly efficient (though surely not the only efficient) system of writing, was perfected in the eighth century B.C.E. Thomas finds much of this earlier scholarship too biased in favor of modern literate attitudes, however, and her study is avowedly revisionist as she seeks a clearer understanding of both the new literacy and the surviving orality.

She seeks first to describe how oral epic poems were composed and transmitted. Contrary to the established view, which maintained that formulaic structure served to prompt the speaker in oral performance so that the tales came out more or less the same every time, she argues that much explicit memorization may in fact have occurred. Homer and his fellows probably prepared large portions of their work in advance, she says, just as writers would later go through several drafts. Thus, premeditation and reworking a passage until it was in just the desired form may have been as characteristic of oral culture as they became in literate culture. This supports the view that the oral and literate minds were not fundamentally different. Moreover, that conclusion opens the way to a subtler treatment of writing's impact on oral forms, supplementing and complementing them, rather than simply pre-empting (Ong's word) them. In that way, it is possible to see a significantly expanded range of uses for writing beyond those usually identified.

Writing was not only useful for accomplishing routine business; it also served to guard property symbolically, to offer people and things to the gods, to reinforce the spoken word and give it an apparent timelessness, to allow inanimate objects to "speak," and even (it was thought) to increase the potency of magical spells.[26]

Of particular relevance to archivists is Thomas's argument for the need to move beyond what she calls an exclusively "rationalist view" of writing—that is, the unspoken and highly literate assumption that writing means only what the words mean. Literacy has many uses beyond the communication of information, she points out. It is itself an artform, exploited as necessary to enhance its visual effect: inscriptions may have a few lines of writing from left to right, others from right to left, and even some occasional *boustrophedon*, that is, "as the ox ploughs" up one line and back down the next—rather like the way modern computer printers work! Writing was also associated with magical powers, both positive and negative, and from an early stage different writing materials carried their own peculiar associations. Lead was always used for inscribing curses, for example, while pottery was the equivalent of contemporary scrap paper; writing on gold was generally reserved for religious texts, and bronze was often used for official public decrees. Though the Greeks did engage in what we would consider some recognizable archival practices, they reposed more faith and respect in the public display of important records than in their preservation in archives. On the very face of things, it seemed improbable to think that a fragile papyrus copy would be more likely to survive and remain authoritative

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[25]Foremost among earlier studies was the work of Eric A. Havelock, who prefigured some of his conclusions about the impact of literacy on Greek culture in his *Preface to Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) and then developed them fully in *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Also significant, of course, is the work of Milman Parry, who demonstrated in the 1930s that the works of Homer had survived for centuries in oral form before ever getting written down; see Adam Parry, ed., *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[26]See Thomas's challenge of traditional interpretations of Homer in chapter 3 ("Oral Poetry") and her itemization of the varied uses of writing on pp. 56–73.

than a carved and publicly erected stone monument.[27]

In all of this, Thomas challenges Ernst Posner head-on, accusing him of reading modern notions of recordkeeping back onto a culture where they either did not exist or, at least, were less significant. A desire to find in the ancient world parallels to nineteenth- and twentieth-century archival practice is misplaced, she thinks, and it distorts the historical reality. Challenging both particular evidence and the larger interpretive framework of Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World*, Thomas finds that the administrative uses of literacy in ancient Greece were more exception than rule. Sparta apparently kept almost no official records at all, for example; it was, she says, "a state which seems to have run in all essentials without the help of writing, let alone archives." Athens, by contrast, produced a variety of documents, which it saw as reinforcing its radical democracy, but it lacked both a formal bureaucracy as such and what Thomas calls a definable "archive mentality." Such collections of records as were compiled were thought of only as supplementary, a distinctly less important form of preservation than public display and monumental inscription. Even the term archives itself has been applied too loosely to Greek practice, she maintains; rather than organized collections of administrative documents consulted for their practical value, these *demosia grammata* (meaning, literally, nothing more than "public writing") were "haphazard mixtures of records on a variety of materi-

als."[28] Most archivists will probably continue to start their exploration of ancient archives with Posner, but they will ignore Thomas's corrections of that picture at their peril.

Ancient Literacy

Thomas concludes her book with a brief epilogue which projects the story forward into the Roman world. For a more detailed treatment of that subject, however, readers should study William V. Harris's *Ancient Literacy*, which examines writing in both Greece and Rome as a single phenomenon. At least until the end of the classical period, it is fair to say that once the use of writing had spread to a particular region, it seldom declined there. In spite of this apparently relentless progress, however, Harris deliberately sets out to change our perception of how widespread literacy was in Greece and Rome. Most classicists, impressed by the amount, variety, and content of surviving documentation, have been disposed to think that the ability to read and write was common. By detailing the factors that made literacy difficult—the high cost of writing materials; the absence of any coherent system of schooling; the lack of any structural economic need for broad-based literacy; the endurance of an oral tradition that was serviceable enough for most people—Harris revises downward the estimate of the rates of literacy, concluding that at most 10 percent of the population of Greece and certainly no more than 15 percent of Romans were truly literate.[29] Specialists will continue to debate this evidence, as they have already, but at the very

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[27]For Thomas's description of the non-rationalist uses of literacy, see especially pp. 74–88. In this connection, readers should also note Clanchy's discussion of seals (*From Memory to Written Record*, second edition, 308–17), which became popular in part because they looked, usually wrongly, as though they would last longer than the documents to which they were attached.

[28]Thomas's challenge to Posner is on pp. 132–44. The temptation to anachronism in archival history is strong. On rereading my own "Herodotus and the Written Record," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 148–60, I find a little too much of an attempt to discover modern usage in ancient practice.

[29]See especially chapter 1 ("Levels of Greek and Roman Literacy").

least Harris's work serves as a warning to those who look for the attitudes of fully literate moderns in very different times and cultures.

Archivists will find more to reflect on in Harris's discussion of just what the ancients did with writing. He begins with a long list of uses, which included the mundane (''to maintain accounts''), the high-minded (''to transmit works of literature''), the political (''to cast a vote''), the commemorative (''to memorialize the dead''), and the unexpected (''to curse someone''). Just as interesting are the uses for writing that were apparently absent. Greek commanders in the field rarely wrote letters home to their superiors, for example, and no classical Hellenic state drew up an effective census of property; even as late as the end of the Republic in Rome, legislation was seldom recorded after it was passed, leading no less a personage than Cicero to complain that the law was whatever the magistrates' clerks said it was.[30]

In Imperial Rome literacy spread more widely, but the transition from oral to written culture remained uneven. No one ever thought of making the diffusion of the knowledge of letters into the populace at large a serious political goal, leaving male members of the aristocracy, a small number of their slaves, and only exceptional women able to write. Complicating the matter still further, the vast number of local languages encompassed by the Empire made uniformly literate methods of procedure difficult; Latin was of course the ideal, but open hostility toward it and toward records and documents written in it remained strong. Running the Empire came to depend to some degree on writing, but

the unevenness of schooling kept the skill confined in narrow class and gender paths. Increased literacy was probably encouraged by the spread of Christianity in the late Empire, but the barbarian invasions took their toll: as society fell apart, the arts of reading and writing became less important in themselves and less worth the trouble of trying to teach to the young. Thus, Harris concludes, ''in almost every sphere of life and in very many regions writing was used less in the fifth century A.D. than it had been in the period before 250.''[31]

Clanchy and a Whole Lot More

Archivists will thus find in these studies, individually and collectively, a broad consideration of the dynamics of literacy and the role of written records in society. Those who think they know the topic already might more usefully come to see it as ''Clanchy—and a whole lot more.'' The details of particular times and places may at first glance seem far removed from present-day archival concerns, but the parallel of these ancient and medieval societies with our own is more telling than we might expect. It is interesting, of course, that so many studies have focused on remote historical periods for which the surviving evidence is relatively scarce and hard to decipher. The authors' achievements are the more welcome for their having had to wring as much meaning as possible out of fragmentary sources. The study of more proximate transitions to literacy, especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, has also been advancing in recent years, and archivists would do well to acquaint themselves with that literature

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[30]Harris's list of functions for literacy is on pp. 26–27. See also his overview of the entire subject in chapter 2 (''The Functions of Literacy in the Graeco-Roman World''), together with his discussion of some of the things that are missing from ancient literacy, pp. 78–79 and 164–65.

[31]Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 326. The full discussions of this wide time span are in chapters 7 (''The Late Republic and the High Empire, 100 B.C.–250 A.D.'') and 8 (''Literacy in Late Antiquity'').

too.[32] In the meantime, how might archivists put such studies in the history of literacy to work? Does a deepened understanding of the materials with which archivists work every day improve their ability to do that demanding job? Does this recent scholarship help move us toward a more usable archival past?

Stepping back from the particular cases, we can see that Clanchy and his fellow scholars are all describing major shifts from orality to literacy and, to a lesser extent, from writing to print. A culture like ours, making a transition from literacy and print to electronic communication, which combines literate and near-oral modes, can understand that process better by understanding the earlier shifts. Any such changeover takes a long time and is seldom neat or painless. Oral methods, for example, survive even as literate methods take root. Authors deliberately producing written works continue to compose by dictating to someone else; verbal agreements between individuals continue to be solemnized with oral ceremonies, confirmed after the fact by written documents; courts admit written records as legitimate evidence along with personal testimony, even though the one can be cross-examined as the other cannot. In all such cases, as Stock points out, orality retains its force, but it operates in a world governed increasingly by writing.

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[32]Some of the important studies in this area include: Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); Carl F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); David D. Hall and John B. Hench, *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639–1876* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1987); and Janet D. Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

Similarly, the transition from pure manuscript literacy to print culture is also a significant step. For one thing, a clearer distinction emerges between originals and copies. We begin to distinguish, for example, the version of a literary work emerging from the author's own pen, which we designate as the "original" and invest with a fuller force of authority, from the numerous printed copies subsequently produced from it. These latter are useful because they can be so readily and widely accessible, but each copy has less inherent value than the original: if one is lost it can be replaced as the original cannot. It is even possible for corruptions and variations, intentional or otherwise, to creep into these printed versions, thereby compromising their authoritative character. The manuscripts survive, but they operate in a world dominated increasingly by printed texts. As readers of this journal surely know, there are more libraries than archives.

Today, we face the shift from literacy and print to electronic communication, and we should expect this transition to be every bit as complicated as the earlier ones described by historians. The older forms are not eradicated, but they work within a new mental framework. Literacy seems to "retreat," apparently coming to resemble orality again. Like spoken words, literate texts in electronic form become fluid, never standing still long enough for us to distinguish clearly between originals and copies or between authentic versions and variants. What is the original in the average text produced by a word processor (like this sentence, for instance): the version I typed first, the final version you are now reading, or one of the uncounted versions I set down and reshaped in between? What is the definitive, authoritative text? If you were reading this not in a printed journal but in some interactive medium in which you could open multimedia windows and wander through the text at will—like a

rambling conversation—would your relationship to the text not be fundamentally different? Such particular concerns are surely not identical to those of a medieval man or woman encountering a written document for the first time, but do contemporary men and women not face the same underlying problem as that remote ancestor? We are all, in our own ways, trying to figure out what a new technology and mentality mean, how we can put them to use, and how we can master them rather than the other way around.

It is in this way that archivists can learn from the study of the history of literacy and apply what they learn to their own circumstances. Practicing archivists, for example, those who daily acquire, organize, and make records available, will find most importantly in these studies a kind of analysis which will be useful in comprehending their own settings. As a profession, we are accustomed to saying that the context of documents is essential—is this not what the doctrines of provenance and original order are about?—and the sort of questions that Clanchy and the others bring to the context of written records at various periods can be translated to other historical settings, even to contemporary ones. The point is not to find present-day examples of ancient or medieval processes, or vice versa. Rather, archivists should take the method for looking at archival materials articulated in these studies and apply it to their own circumstances. What does writing do and not do? How does written communication circulate in modern organizations or personal life? What are its formal and informal means? What is the interplay of forces that are expressly literate and those that are nonliterate, such as voice-mail, person-to-person transactions, and (perhaps) e-mail? Serious studies of one's

institutional setting or area of collecting interest that ask these sorts of questions are an important first step toward rational collection development and management. The spread of new technologies is encouraging what many see as ''secondary orality,'' a reinvigoration of oral-like forms within a literate context. If archivists hope to manage the information created in such a world and not just an ever-shrinking portion of it, they should at least recognize that other generations of humans have faced similar problems. Is it too far a reach to think we might even learn something from them?

Archival educators, too, should be aware of these literacy studies and should incorporate them into archival coursework. To continue to rely only on the old chestnuts in this field seriously short-changes students. Those who complain that there is a dearth of interesting and useful literature for seminars and advanced courses are overlooking too much. (All of the works considered here are available in paperback.) Beyond this classroom use, might we not even suggest that archival educators undertake similar studies themselves—not for remote times and places, but for historical circumstances closer to home? How do literacy and orality interact in one's own university, for instance, or, for that matter, in one's own department? What tasks are accomplished in writing, and what important matters of policy and procedure—including, of course, teaching itself—still endure in oral forms? How have electronic forms been integrated into this mix? Archival faculty could undertake their own research on such topics, and they should also encourage this kind of exploration in the form of student papers and theses. We would all learn a great deal.

The past is prologue, you say? Well, yes.