Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies

By Geoffrey Yeo. New York: Routledge, 2021. 222 pp. Hardcover and EPUB. $128.00.
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Graduate programs in archival and library science (in the United States at least) commonly include a course that introduces students to the field of archives and records management. The archives and records management course I took during my graduate training certainly discussed the "Western" history and contributions to the field of records management as we know it today, primarily focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Missing from this class was a discussion of the history of the human activity of creating records in general. It is not surprising that such information with its own dedicated course or inclusion in library and archives curriculum is rare, as most might assume to find the topic covered by history or archaeology departments instead. However, scholars in both the fields of archival science and ancient studies have attempted to describe the early history of archival practices, libraries, and recordkeeping. For example, an edited volume published in 2019 titled *Libraries before Alexandria: Ancient Near Eastern Traditions* (Oxford University Press) features scholars of ancient history and archaeology studying recordkeeping practices as well as collections of literary works from ancient cultures in Egypt and western Asia. Geoffrey Yeo, the author of *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies*, mentions the works of scholars in archival science related to archival practices in the ancient world. Yeo positions his book on records in what he calls "early societies" as being more up to date with scholarship in the fields of archaeology and ancient history than with previous studies by scholars in archival science, and he intends to fill a gap in the literature by investigating record-making rather than solely focusing on recordkeeping.

This book attempts to investigate the beginnings of human recording practices. Yeo clearly makes the distinction between record-making and recordkeeping and provides a survey of both activities across various regions around the world. Though not the first book related to records, archives, and libraries in the ancient world, it discusses the evidence for the roles and uses of records from an archival perspective and seeks to target the discussion to the archives profession. Yeo attempts to do this not only with the content of the book, but with the terminology he uses regarding ancient place names, people, and dates. The book is divided into nine sections that include an introduction followed by eight chapters. With over fifteen years of experience teaching archives and records management at University College London, Yeo uses the introduction to acquaint readers with his conceptual framework of records as "persistent

representations." He also explains the limitations of the book and of previous scholarship on ancient archival practices, and he reinforces that this book covers not only recording practices involving writing, but also the creation of records in societies before writing.

Yeo introduces the reader to the beginnings of record creation in early societies with an engaging discussion on memory construction, the origins of human speech, and the impact of both in the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next. He posits that the need to "retain knowledge beyond the normal limits of memory" led to humans using objects in the natural environment as memory aids, as well as creating them (p. 3). Throughout the book, Yeo discusses the meaning and roles of records and asks the reader to consider how early societies may or may not have perceived them in ways that Western societies do today. He explores the roles of records by considering the concept of records as representations of objects or activities, potential reasons for the development of record-making in various early societies, and evidence regarding "persistence" and integrity of records in these societies.

One of the most thought-provoking topics of the book is the concept of ownership and its relationship to the creation of records. Yeo explores evidence for the transition from communal ownership to a concept of private property in some early societies and argues that records helped facilitate this transition. He further explores the relationship between ownership and records when discussing land transfer records in his chapter on records and writing in Mesopotamia (chapter 3). Yeo also provides a compelling discussion on the performativity of records. He borrows a theory from philosophy known as "speech acts" to investigate the concept of performativity in record-making.

After providing extensive summaries of the evidence for records and writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Aegean, and the Americas, Yeo discusses records and their social context, noting that the societies he focuses on in chapters 3 and 4 are often described as "states." He acknowledges to the reader that these states are "characterized by social stratification, division of labor," and also "the appropriation of resources by ruling elites" (p. 85). Yeo states that recordkeeping "was not invented in urban states," but "practised in earlier agricultural societies" (p. 85). This is particularly important as it reminds the reader of the author's aim to focus not only on written records, but also on nonwritten records. He suggests that people living in agricultural economies before the formation of states began keeping nonwritten records during the adoption of agriculture. Yeo also notes one area of dispute between scholars is the "evolutionary relationship of states and new forms of record-keeping" (p. 86).

Yeo concludes the book by offering thoughts on the relationship between archival scholarship today and early record-making and recordkeeping. He posits that the study of early record-making/keeping has often led archives

professionals to make "unsustainable comparisons" between early societies and modern methods (p. 169). He cautions readers about assuming that the methods and objectives of ancient people were the same as our own. However, he does suggest that some elements of early practice may offer "a starting-point for considering whether any underlying areas of commonality may be found" between early societies and archival practice today (p. 170). Yeo asks the reader throughout his conclusion to think critically about whether our contemporary understanding of archival practice is of value to studying practices from ancient times.

The organization of this book is successful in its attempt to address literature in both ancient studies and archival science. The use of frameworks and theories from other fields such as linguistics and philosophy provide an engaging and thought-provoking way to consider records in early societies, as well as the concept of a record generally. Yeo's approaches to the subject of records involve discussing early human cognition, language, and memory, which prove to be a stimulating path in questioning the purposes of record creation. Ultimately, Yeo successfully surveys evidence from ancient history and archaeology and examines it through the perspective of contemporary archival science.

While Yeo clearly provides the scope and limitations of the book, a few areas could be considered weak in regard to his audience. While the book is well organized, the division of chapters 3 ("Records, Accounting, and the Emergence of Writing in Ancient Mesopotamia") and 4 ("Records and Writing in Other Early Societies: Egypt, the Aegean, China, and the Americas") can seem jarring in terms of the length and content. The amount of content and the attempt to consolidate "other" societies outside of Mesopotamia into one long chapter may not be the most effective approach. Approaching the wealth of materials from various regions and times is obviously an ambitious and challenging task, and Yeo insightfully addresses this in his introduction.

Yeo provides several creative discussions around the evidence for recordmaking and recordkeeping. However, the amount of detail provided in discussing certain types of evidence may be of more use or interest to an audience of scholars in archaeology and ancient history, rather than to scholars and students in archival science. For example, a section in chapter 3 titled "Seals and Seal Impressions" provides a detailed summary of the use of seals around the ancient world. Yeo pays close attention to the social aspects of seals, which may be of more interest to archaeologists and historians studying the social history of this material than to archivists. The following section, "Why Might Sealings Have Been Preserved?," may be of higher interest to an archival science audience, particularly his discussion of auditing.

Chapter 8 ("Concluding Thoughts: Archival Science and Early Records") is helpful in considering the implications of contemporary archival science in

relation to ancient recording practices. Throughout the chapter, Yeo critiques and cautions scholars' comparisons and attempts to create parallels between the practices common to our understanding of the Western field of archival science and those of record-making/keeping practices in early societies. Yet, Yeo also suggests that some comparisons may be relevant to our understanding of such practices. While this is a useful point of departure for critical discussion, it is repeated in several instances throughout the chapter, and Yeo's stance might be considered difficult to follow. For example, after expressing caution about viewing challenges in record practices through a present-day "vantage point," he then suggests that the framework of persistent representations is not only useful in investigating the origins of record practices, but that it is the best framework to meet this aim. More insight as to why Yeo prefers this framework over others, given his earlier warning, could be helpful in better understanding his position.

Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies provides a useful discussion of the role and use of records in early societies. The book is not a simple history of records and archival practices in the ancient world; Yeo weaves in his own work regarding theories of records as well as other approaches from archival science and other fields to examine ancient practices. These theoretical approaches reinforce that his target audience is the archives profession. Yeo's approaches to the concept of a record in general could be particularly useful to engage with in archives and records management courses as he continuously defines what records are, their theoretical frameworks in archival science, and their purposes now and in the ancient past. He argues that scholars should be cautious in suggesting the continuity of archival practices from ancient past to present—a conversation that, if held more often in archival training programs, could yield interesting discourses about what the field might look like in the future.

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