Ancient Reading in Historical Context

Professor Belinda Jack

Welcome to my third lecture on reading. The first two - ‘What is Reading?’ and ‘Reading for Pleasure’ where relatively theoretical. This evening’s and my fourth lecture in a month’s time, are more historically focused. But that’s not to say that I’ll not allow myself some more technical detail.

My title this evening, ‘Ancient Reading in Historical Context’ needs a word of explanation. Why ‘In Historical Context’? Ancient reading is a fascinating subject in and of itself. But my particular interest is in questions of difference. How, and in what ways, has the act of reading, or acts of reading, changed over time? This is what came to fascinate me when writing my book about the history of women’s reading. So this lecture is partly about ancient writing systems, but also about what we know about early reading, given that reading is an ephemeral, and to some degree mysterious, activity.

But before considering reading in the ancient world I’d like, briefly, to go back further to consider three artifacts from different parts of the world, and to ponder how they might have been ‘read’: the ishango bone, discovered in what was then the Belgian Congo, cave images near Lascaux in south-west France, and a South American quipus found at Caral, now 200km north of Lima, in Peru.

The earliest ‘reading’ by Homo sapiens was essentially a decoding of signs. The modern discipline which concerns itself with making sense of signs is semiotics. Semiotics as a distinct subject of academic study emerged in the opening decades of the last century but it was first coined by John Locke in his Essay on Human(e) Understanding (1690) [Human Knowledge - Physics, Semiotics and Ethics]. There are now myriad different branches of semiotics with distinct theories of what signs are, and how they ‘mean’. But semiotics can essentially be divided into three areas:

- **Semantics** – relation between signs and the things to which they refer; their denotata, or meaning
- **Syntactics** – relations among signs in formal structures
- **Pragmatics** – relation between signs and the effects they have on the people who use them

It’s primarily semantics which are worth considering here in terms of the three artifacts we’ll be considering. Within semantics, there are three basic categories:

- **The Symbol** – Is a sign that has no resemblance to what it represents.
- **The Icon** – Is a sign that shows a resemblance to what it represents.
- **The Index** – Is a sign that is directly connected to what it represents.

So, take a look at these signs; are they symbols, icons or indexes?

1 Facebook = symbol
2 Tree = icon; not a real tree but colour, shape etc suggest a tree
3 lips = index
4 recycling = symbol
5 scan of a foetus = icon
6 Michelangelo’s Statue of David = index
7 Van Gogh’s ‘Sunflowers’ = index
8 Phone receiver (old-fashioned) = icon

So how does this relate to the most primitive reading?

This is the Ishango bone, a slightly curved fibula of a baboon, about 10 cm long and dark brown in colour, with a piece of quartz fitted into one end. It was found in what was then the Belgian Congo. It is an artifact which was first estimated to have originated between 9,000 BC and 6,500 BC, but there have been claims that it is up to 22,000 years old. It is on permanent exhibition at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels, Belgium.

I’ve sawn this pencil down to 10cm so that its size is clear.

The notches are clearly man-made – this hasn’t been disputed by archaeologists. So the question is, how were these ‘read’ by early man? If they are ‘symbols’ – signs that bear no resemblance to what they represent - in semiotic terms – what do they stand for? What can this ancient piece of baboon bone tell us about the earliest ‘reading’? All manner of fascinating theories have been proposed. [It says something wonderful about our humanity that a small, very old animal bone with a few markings on it can arouse such intense speculation and debate!] Who are the monkeys??

Among the most convincing theories are those that decipher mathematical meaning. One school of thought
believes that the three columns of asymmetrically grouped notches imply that the implement was used to construct a number system and it has to be read as a numerical calculator.

There are three columns of notches. The middle one begins with three notches, and then doubles to 6 notches. This sequence is repeated for the number 4, which doubles to 8 notches. Then there is a reversal for the number 10, which is divided in two and becomes 5 notches. So some have argued that these are not random numbers but evidence of some understanding of the principle of multiplication and division by two. The bone, they argue, may have been used as a counting tool for simple mathematical calculations.

And you can go further: The numbers on both the left and right column are all odd numbers (9, 11, 13, 17, 19 and 21). The numbers in the right column are all of the prime numbers between 10 and 20 (which form a prime quadruplet), while those in the right column consist of 10 + 1, 10 − 1, 20 + 1 and 20 − 1. The numbers on each side column add up to 60, with the numbers in the central column adding up to 48.

So do we buy it? In his wonderful book How Mathematics Happened: The First 50,000 Years [great title – presumably we’ll have to wait another 50,000 years for vol. 2], Peter Rudman argues that the concept of prime numbers could only have been derived from the concept of division. But he dates the discovery of division to after 10,000 BC, and the discovery of prime numbers probably not being understood until about 500 BC. So is the bone not as old as has been proposed? Or is the mathematical reading of the notches erroneous – a matter of coincidence? Or is Rudman wrong? Working with very ancient artifacts is a tricky business...

There have also been arguments that the bone can be read as an astronomical text, recording the lunar calendar.

Microscopic imagery, according to Alexander Marshack, suggests that the notches correspond with a six-month lunar calendar. More extravagant, perhaps, is Judith Robinson’s contention that Marshack has over-interpreted the evidence and that the notches are more likely to mark out stages in the female menstrual cycle. Thus Claudia Zaslavsky has suggested that this may indicate that the creator of the tool was - you’ve guessed it - a woman! More deflating theories are that the notches are random and simply made to provide a grip – friction - to the handle of the tool! This would mean that, strictly speaking, it has no ‘semiotic’ meaning as the notches are not to be read as part of a system, put rather random markings to fulfill an ergonomic function. As an aside it’s interesting to note that tool-making has been likened to a language as it is a sequential process with a correct ‘order’, a ‘grammar’, one could even suggest.

So what of other early reading? What about cave paintings near Lascaux? Are these symbols, icons or indexes?

How do we ‘read’ this image or images? A good deal of work has been done in a variety of disciplines to try to establish how we process complex visual compositions both in real life – when looking at a street scene, say - and in reproductions, including art. Psychophysicists mostly agree that the sequence of processing is generally:
1. Big to Small.
2. Top to Bottom.
3. Inside to Outside.
4. Left to Right.

Again it may be that this sequential process can also be likened to a language if it is established that the order of processing is common to groups.

Gloss processing habits, evolution, convention etc, etc.

This image is in the Lascaux cave known as Lascaux II. These paintings were made early Homo sapiens (previously known as Cro-Magnon peoples) probably around 18,000 years ago. From the early twentieth century, coinciding with the birth of modern semiotics - there have been intriguing attempts to ‘read’ these images, to prove their purpose, or meaning.

Some adopted the nineteenth-century idea that this was ‘Art for Art’s sake’, in other words these images were devoid of any didactic or moral purpose. They were simply representations of real animals and that there is no ‘deeper’ meaning (interesting that we use the metaphor ‘deep’ (as opposed to superficial) in relation to meaning). Other, perhaps braver or more imaginative scholars, have associated cave images with the idea of totemism, a system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a corresponding spirit-being, which might be an animal or plant. The entity, or totem, is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol. So we shouldn’t simply ‘read’ this image as a representation of a horse – rather as an ‘icon’ in semiotic terms, which is also a symbol for an individual or group. The ‘totemic’ reading of cave paintings is no longer taken seriously, at least by mainstream archaeologists.

The most famous and eminent interpreter of cave art, however, was Abbé Breuil (1877 - 1961), and his theories held sway for decades. He was a French priest and archaeologist, Professor at the Collège de France. In 1952 he
published 400 Years of Cave Art, a ground-breaking study of 92 caves worldwide. [Breuil, by his own calculation, spent a total of seven years underground!] Now, his theory of cave painting was associated with masking practices. He drew parallels with the aboriginal Arunta people of Central Australia. Breuil’s theory was that the Palaeolithic cave paintings at Lascaux, like those of the Arunta, were records of hunting practices that involved ‘dressing up’ as the prey you wanted to attract. The existence of images of the animals they sported themselves as also had a magical effect, multiplying the number of real animals available to them as prey. Images of slaughtered prey also increased the likelihood – by magic – of successful hunts. These practices are examples of ‘sympathetic magic’, a theory proposed by the 19th century anthropologist James Frazer. What is done to the representative object has a real effect on the object it embodies. [pins in dolls etc]

There have been so-called structuralist interpretations of cave paintings too. The method involves leaving aside all ideas of primitive societies and examining only the evidence. This involves drawing up inventories and diagrams of all the marks on the cave wall and trying to establish relationships between them. This privileges syntactics – an interest in the relations between images, over semantics – the image in relation to the object or objects it refers to, – and pragmatics – the possible effects of the image or images on the viewer. Structuralist methodologies are still in use although no conclusive theories have been forthcoming for some time.

In the 90s a new theory was proposed, associated with Shamanism. Shamanism is an animalistic belief system in which mediation between the visible and the spiritual world if affected. In addition, in shamanic religions, there is a notion that two or multiple worlds coexist, side by side, or one superior to the other. These worlds interact, and events in this world are affected. Another belief is that some humans – shamans – have a privileged relationship with the other worlds and can thus intervene to help those in our world. Shamans are also able – through the power of trance – to pass into other worlds. Shamans thus have both a role as mediators between the real and the spirit worlds, and a social and utilitarian function.

We know that early Homo sapiens regularly found their way into deep caves and this was for not for shelter or safety. Given that the underground has been inseparably associated with the dead and the supernatural since very ancient times, it has been suggested that these dark and often dramatic spaces may have been seen as ways in to another world. Some people clearly dared to enter these mysterious places. Some have argued that there is both a physical and a psychological dimension in play here. When Upper Palaeolithic people descended into these caves it could be that they believed that they were in a supernatural world and that they may have had visions or hallucinations. These – so the argument goes - are what they recorded on the caves’ walls. These are theories and it is unlikely that they will ever be more than that.

The current view, by and large, is that we will never know how to read these images so as to distil ‘meaning’.

Contemporary archaeologists now focus on meticulous documentation and scientific dating.

What of other early reading? This is a quipus, plural quipu, also spelt khipus, khipu. Here is one: These were ‘read’ by the Incas throughout their Empire. Some are known to have pre-dated the Incas, belonging to the Chimú state. They may have been used by Moche and Tiwanaku civilizations. The oldest known quipus was discovered at Caral (now 200km north of Lima in Peru; ), and dates back some 4600 years.

Until relatively recently the prevailing view of what the quipus is and its meaning was this: It consists of a length of rope from which numerous other threads are suspended, some of them with their own subsidiary offshoots. The length of each thread, its colour and the position of any knots in it can acquire specific meanings. At its simplest this is an easy way of recording quantities of different goods. If a length or colour of thread is an agreed symbol for a given commodity, the knots (registering units, tens or hundreds) will give a quick account of the total. The quipus can also cope with more abstract themes. If threads or knots are allocated the role of days and months, a time scale is easily recorded. In this way simple historical records can be kept, such as the length of a king’s reign since his accession.

What a quipus cannot do is substitute for writing. It can record how long a king has reigned but not what his name was. It may provide a messenger with a mnemonic (any technique which helps memory retention), but it is the messenger who must remember the message.

However, in his ground-breaking book, A History of the Khipu (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Dr. Galen Brokaw argues that the khipu is part of a semiotic system that stands in for writing. This is a bold line to take as, traditionally, the accepted view was that Andean peoples had no writing and relied solely on oral cultures.

Brokaw begins by proposing a theoretical model that reconciles orality and literacy studies with media theory, in order to avoid what he sees as the specious dichotomization of societies into those with and without writing. He is concerned with the way in which a given society distributes semiotic functions among the various media that it employs and the kinds of economic and political integration within which these media function. This theoretical model then informs a history of the Andean khipu from pre-Columbian times through the first 120 years of the colonial period. The first half of the book examines early Andean media and their socioeconomic and political contexts, culminating with the emergence of Wari and then Inca khipu. The second half of the book documents and analyzes the continuing use of khipu by indigenous individuals and communities in their dealings with Spanish officials, chroniclers, and priests. The book sets out to revise a number of misconceptions about the
history of the khipu, such as the alleged mass destruction of khipu in the late sixteenth century. But its more substantial argument is that it demonstrates the exchanges that took place in the colonial period between the administrative and historiographic discourses of alphabetic Spanish and those of native Andean khipu genres. It complicates the oversimplification between orality and literacy as fundamental characteristics of a society, one that is overlaid with distinctions between the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilised’.

But writing, as opposed to symbols, is distinct in another sense, because writing is the ‘sequencing of standardized symbols (characters or signs) in order to produce a graphic representation of human speech. Writing, as opposed to the use of what are called ‘indexical symbols’ – five pebbles to represent five sheep – took a long time coming. It was the Sumerian scribes, only 3,000 years ago, who developed systemic phoneticism. That’s to say they started to coordinate sounds and symbols (including pictograms) to create ‘signs’ or a writing system.

This new communication system spread west to the Nile, east to the Iranian Plateau and even to the Indus. The Sumerians lived in what is now modern Iraq. During the 3rd millennium BC, a very intimate cultural symbiosis developed between the Sumerians and the Akkadians, which included widespread bilingualism. Gradually Akkadian replaced Sumerian, probably c. 2000 BC.

So what is there to read (in tc.2400 – 1100 BCE) in this, the oldest written language of our race? Well, a surprising amount: hymns, lamentations, prayers (to various gods), incantations (v. various sources of evil), love literature, wisdom literature (proverbs, fables, riddles), long epics, and myths. In total some 550 ‘texts’ exist. [More info. @ SEAL – Sources of Early Akkadian Literate Website] But despite this significant body of texts it is important to note that most literary culture remained oral, and writing was seen very much as a craft carrying little kudos. Being able to read and write were not signs of higher rank.

This was not the case, it seems, in the other important civilization of the Near East, Egypt. Here the literary culture was, once again, above all oral. But literacy was associated with administrative duties and could bring social advancement. We know this because of the existence of various letters. The Egyptian bureaucrat Dua-Khety, writing to his son, advised:

Set your thoughts just on writing, for I have seen people saved by their labour. Behold, there is nothing greater than writings. They are like a boat on water. Let me teach you to love writing more than [you love] your mother. Let me encourage its beauty into your sight. For it is greater than any office. There is nothing like it on earth.

The extraordinary civilizations of the Near and Middle East died out. There are no extant written records after 640 BC.

Fortunately there were other civilizations in the ascendant. The Greek and Roman Empires included literate people but orality remained the prized preserve of intellectuals. In fact writing and reading were often seen as both potentially subversive and a ‘cheat’! Plato, for example, expressed reservations in his Phaedrus, a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus and he has the latter declare, ‘Every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand it and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak.... When ill-treated or unjustly abused it [the word] always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.’

For Plato, like many ancient ‘spoken discourse’ was the language of truth and written discourse always subject to ‘mis-reading’ or ‘mis-interpretation’. Reading aloud was one thing as there could be discussion and debate about what the text meant. But slowly but surely reading aloud in a group gave way to solitary, silent reading. And when we think of reading we think primarily of this secret, silent and act, carried out alone.

Now the subject of silent reading has aroused a good deal of debate. A famous passage in St Augustine’s Confessions (4th century AD) accounts for much of the misunderstandings. He described his teacher’s practice of silent reading. Of St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Augustine wrote:

When he was reading, he drew his eyes along over the leaves, and his heart searched into its sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. Oft-times when we were present... we still saw him reading to himself, and never otherwise.... But with what intent soever he did it, that man certainly had a good meaning to it.

Now Augustine’s surprise at Ambrose’s reading method was interpreted as evidence that silent reading was very rare and that the common practice must have been reading aloud. This presumption was well embedded in German history. Nietzsche, for example, wrote:

‘The German does not read aloud, does not read for the ear but merely with his eyes: he has put his ears in the drawer. In antiquity, when a man read – which he did very seldom – he read to himself... in a loud voice; it was a matter of surprise if someone read quietly, and people secretly asked themselves why he did so. In a loud voice: that is to say, with all the crescendos, inflections, variations of tone and changes of tempo in which the ancient public world took pleasure.’

What Nietzsche goes on to argue is that the greatest German prose was written for the pulpit. The greatest work, he claims, is Luther’s Bible, intended to be read out in churches.
But the fact of the matter is that there is ample evidence that some private, silent reading went on in the classical period. Euripides (c. 480 – 406 BC) in his tragedy, Hippolytus, the King, Theseus, confronted with the corpse of his wife, Phaedra, finds a letter fastened to her hand. While the Chorus expresses its foreboding, Theseus silently reads the letter. In it, Phaedra falsely accuses Hippolytus of having raped her. His silent reading then contrasts with his emotional remonstrations. The letter, he says, "shrieks, it howls horrors insufferable ... a voice from the letter speaks ..."

Plutarch (c. 46 – 120 AD), in a speech entitled ‘On the Fortune of Alexander’, tells us that when Alexander the Great was reading a confidential letter from his mother – silently – his friend, Hephaestion ‘quietly put his head beside Alexander’s and read the letter with him; Alexander could not bear to stop him, but took off his ring and placed the seal on Hephaestion’s lips’. The story is told four times, presumably for emphasis. Alexander doesn’t become angry with his friend’s presumption, but behaves like a philosopher, discreetly impressing on his friend that such correspondence is highly confidential.

In order to read aloud effectively, particularly before words were separated by spacing (as was the practice in the classical world), you need to be able to look ahead of what you are enunciating, as musicians must when reading music. Silent reading, arguably, is a necessary adjunct to reading aloud for sound but also, crucially, for sense. What shocked Augustine, some classicists have argued, was that Ambrose read silently in company. He was reading in front of visitors but didn’t share his reading with them. This may have been unusual, even, perhaps, deemed impolite. But Gavrilov, surely one of the great authorities in the matter of silent reading, concludes: ‘... the phenomenon of reading itself is fundamentally the same in modern as in ancient culture. Cultural diversity does not exclude an underlying unity.’

Although the practice of reading may have changed very little across time, what we make of our reading certainly has. Take the case of Sappho. This is a fragment of a Sappho poem. And here is an early representation of her [vase].

Sappho is undoubtedly the most famous and intriguing ancient Greek woman reader. She was born round about 620BC. The ancients praised her in hyperbolic fashion and some regarded her as the tenth Muse. She continued to be widely-read until the Middle Ages. Strabo, the Greek stoic scholar (c. 63/64 BC – c. AD 24) wrote of her several hundred years after her death around 570BC, ‘in this whole span of recorded time we know of no woman to challenge her as a poet even in the slightest degree’. Christine de Pisan lists Sappho in her Cité des Dames (The Book of the City of Ladies, 1405) as one of the eighteen proofs that women are as intellectually able as men. In the early Renaissance, Raphael includes Sappho in his painting of Parnassus.

Sappho is the only mortal to have been included. Skipping forward again, we find Victorian women naming Sappho most frequently in a poll asking readers to name the twelve most important women in history in The Pall Mall Gazette.

But today we have only tantalising fragments of her nine books, and quotations and references to her in ancient authors, and scraps of ancient papyrus and parchment copies, mostly from the Roman period. These sorry remains are numbered to 264 in modern editions but only sixty-three contain complete lines and only twenty-one contain complete verses. Only four poems have survived in sufficient wholeness for us to have a sense of Sapphic poetic structure.

Nevertheless what little we have of Sappho is strikingly different from her male contemporaries, like Hesiod and Alcaeus, most particularly. A distinctively feminine voice comes through. There is an emotional range, reservations about war and violence, a striking sense of individuality and a portrayal of women that quite different from other contemporary representations. Take fragment 16:

Some say an army of horsemen, some an army on foot
and some say a fleet of ships is the loveliest sight...but I say it is what-
ever you desire...

Helen of Troy is described by Sappho as desiring a man who was not her husband, and her passion is presented as more rational than that of men’s for fleets of ships. Alcaeus, on the other hand wrote bluntly of Helen ‘But through Helen, the Trojans perished/and all their city’. Sappho introduced a new range of human feeling into Greek poetry and for this she was highly respected indeed. But her image today is based on a limited number of fragments which can be reconstructed to exaggerate - or down play - her importance.

Sappho seduces us in part because she is such an early poetess. But she also fascinates us because unlike many of her male contemporaries, Homer most obviously, whose works remain as good as intact, Sappho is something of a clean slate onto which others can – and have – projected myriad fantasies. And the echoes of Sappho in poets from Ovid to T.S.Eliot create an extraordinary rich after-life for her across the millennia. Catullus imitated her – a sure sign of respect. Much later, however, there were noteworthy detractors. Pope described a
woman author of his period not only as a ‘promiscuous Sappho’ but a syphilitic one into the bargain. By the 19th century women were boldly reading Sappho as a feminist originator. Christina Rossetti described her as a role model. During the same period men read Sappho rather differently. Baudlaire and Swinburne saw her as a sadomasochistic and androgynous femme fatale.

Sappho has clearly been used, re-invented, and even almost erased as a unique voice - in others’ literary images of her. This is perhaps still more visible in visual representations of her, like so many other accomplished women, who have been the subject of a male voyeuristic gaze. Yet we need to remember, once again, that we have so very little of Sappho actually to read.

So reading as a ‘practice’ may not have changed much over time. The notion that most reading in the ancient world was out loud has been debunked. But that is not to say that the way we read – in terms of our understanding of written material - hasn’t changed. The case of Sappho surely demonstrates this. And in terms of the history of reading, that variety of reading experiences grows and grows. And it’s that wonderful variety that I’ll be talking about in my next lecture.