LECTURE ONE: THE MEDIA OF EARLY CIVILIZATION

Overview

(Slide) What is communication and (slide) why is the development of expression considered to be a measure of humanity (slide)? These are fundamental questions, the answers to which lie not in our recent past but in fact, reside with our prehistoric ancestors. Communication, defined by Crowley and Heyer (2003:2) as being “the exchange of information and messages”, is a necessity in any situation in which groups of people live together in close proximity. However, often the first indication of a society that is evolving is the development of some form of communication medium.

Approximately one hundred thousand years ago, communication is generally thought to have consisted of non-verbal gestures combined with what Crowley and Heyer (2003:2) refer to as the “evolving system of spoken language”. Yet as prehistoric society progressed and the way of living became increasingly complex, there developed the necessity for an “extrasomatic memory”, defined as being “a memory outside of the body” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:2). In other words, a medium of communication was needed that would allow these early civilizations “to store and retrieve a growing volume of information” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:2).

In the first essay of this section, (slide) Marshack clearly demonstrates his belief that the symbols and art of the Ice Age had a purpose beyond their initial aesthetic quality. Instead of capitulating to the common assumption that many Ice Age artefacts were used solely for ‘ritual magic’, Marshack’s fundamental claim is that (slide) these images and objects are examples of an early civilization’s systematic attempts at using symbols to record specific details about their natural surroundings. It is in this way that such artwork and symbols could be considered examples of a rudimentary communications medium. While this perspective may be viewed with scepticism by some, Marshack has raised an interesting point for consideration – that the artwork and symbols of Ice Age Man can no longer be dismissed purely as “arts for arts sake” (Marshack 2003:8). Their presence is therefore not indicative of an artistic revolution but rather, as Marshack (2003:8) states (slide), of “a cultural revolution”.

A similar argument is explored by Rudgley in his essay (slide), A New Rosetta Stone. (slide) Many of you would be familiar with the Rosetta stone, the discovery of which enabled the decipherment of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, according to Rudgley there may exist another ‘Rosetta stone’ to “explain the emergence of writing” itself (Rudgley 2003:15). By
exploring the archaeological work of Denise Schmandt-Besserat, Rudgley attempts to
demonstrate that before the documented emergence of writing, there exists sufficient evidence of
numerous early civilizations using clay tokens as a means of recording trade transactions and
economic output (slide). (slide) In what way is his argument similar to Marshack’s? Previously
dismissed as “apparently insignificant and rather mundane clay objects” (Rudgley 2003:15),
Rudgley’s argument that these artefacts actually served as a communication medium, shares
certain similarities with Marshack’s. According to Rudgley, many of the marks on these clay
tokens appear similar to writing characters known as ‘ideograms’. What is an ideogram (slide)?
An ideogram can be identified as being a sign that does not look like what it represents. It is in
this way that these tokens could potentially be considered evidence of the development of a
rudimentary writing script.

The third essay (slide) in this section, entitled Media in Ancient Empires, raises an important
point for consideration – (slide) why do different cultures adopt different communication
media? According to Harold Innis (Crowley & Heyer 2003:3), every “major old World
civilization had a specific cultural orientation” that was either determined by “temporal or
spatial” requirements (slide). For example, a “centralized absolute government of divine
kingship” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:3) such as that of Ancient Egypt and the Pharaohs favoured a
more durable, long-lasting, ‘time-biased’ medium of communication, such as stone. Papyrus, on
the other hand, was a portable, light medium of communication. Being ‘space-biased’, papyrus
proved more suitable for administration and record-keeping over considerable distances. The
adoption of this medium over stone proved to have significant consequences for the development
of the Egyptian civilization, which will be explored in further detail later in this lecture.

In the fourth essay of this section, Marcia and Robert Ascher (slide) address a fundamental
issue (slide) – is writing necessary for civilization? The Ascher’s use the example of the Incas
who, unlike other New World civilizations – including the Mayans and the Aztecs, never
developed a system of symbols and markings to form a rudimentary writing script. However this
fact did not prove to be detrimental to the Incas’ development into a “complex, state-level
organization” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:3). Instead, the Incas conceived of an alternative
communications medium that still allowed the accumulation of large quantities of information –
(slide) the Quipu. The quipu was an arrangement of strings that were used in census’ to catalogue
the state’s resources. The length, thickness and colour of each string, in addition to the number of
knots tied into each one, represented different quantities of information. A space-biased medium,
like the papyrus, the quipu allowed “for administration over distance” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:4)
without the use of writing.
However, that said, “most of the world’s early civilizations” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:4) utilized some form of writing in their development. Andrew Robinson in fact (slide), analyses a number of different writing styles from various cultures in the final essay of this section – The Origins of Writing. Robinson concluded that while the actual form and structure of these various writing styles may have altered between different cultures and civilizations, (slide) they still functioned in much the same way. They all monitored and correlated “the information necessary for the maintenance of a complex society” (Crowley & Heyer 2003:4). Robinson also raises an important point (slide) in clarifying that many of the principles of these rudimentary writing styles, such as the use of ideograms, are still present in our society today – a fact that we will be examining in closer detail soon. We will now be further examining two chapters of this section, beginning with (slide)…

**FOCUS: Innis and Media in Ancient Empires**

It is not certain what factors or circumstances initiated the development of hieroglyphics in Egypt. While evidence suggests that at this particular point in history, there was contact between Egypt and Mesopotamia where cuneiform writing was evolving, the considerable differences that exist between these two different styles indicates that while the concept of writing may have been passed on to Egypt, (slide) the actual writing style of hieroglyphics evolved independently.

The first medium initially used by both civilizations was stone or clay. For example, hieroglyphics carved into stone monuments were used by the Egyptians to officially record a Pharaoh’s possessions, conquests and achievements. However, the Ancient Egyptians believed that writing possessed a certain sacred quality that was intrinsically connected in their minds with magic and religion. In fact, their actual phrase for hieroglyphics (slide) – *medw netjer*, translates to “the god’s words” (Gahlin 2001:125). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that hieroglyphics soon began to appear in religious and commemorative texts as well (McDermott 2001).

Ancient Egyptians “saw pictures and writing as objects that could be brought to life by magic” (McDermott 2001:64). An example of this phenomenon is the ‘offering formula’. Carved on the outside of funeral tombs, it was believed that every time the formula was read by a passer-by, the spirit of the deceased received sustenance. Words were vital to the Ancient Egyptians for it was believed that they held the key of attaining immortality. The *Book of the Dead* (slide), for example, contained specific spells and instructions to help a deceased spirit travel safely through the Underworld. A series of spells known as the *Coffin Texts* (slide) then empowered the spirit to
evade the ‘Second Judgment’ in which the ‘heart’ of the deceased was weighed “against the feather of Matt in the Hall of Judgment” (McDermott 2001:72) – Matt being the goddess of justice, truth and order (Gahlin 2001). If found lacking, the deceased’s heart would then be devoured by the Ammit (or the ‘Gobbler’) – (slide) a beast with a crocodile’s head, a lion’s front legs and body and a hippopotamus’ back legs, and they would suffer the ‘Second Death’ and would cease to exist entirely – a terrifying thought for the Ancient Egyptians.

These spells and incantations were originally designed for the sole use of the royal family as it was generally believed that they were the only ones entitled to an afterlife. However when eventually the Egyptian people decided that an afterlife was a right entitled to all, the ‘divine kingship’ of the Pharaohs began to break down (slide), resulting in the “rise of powerful local rulers” (McDermott 2001:72) and the establishment of a more democratic organization of government (slide). While the King still remained a figure of great power and authority, much of his administrative power was now delegated to local authorities under a central administration, resulting in the increased need for correspondence. As such, this time of great upheaval in the Egyptian civilization also “coincided with a shift in emphasis on stone as a medium of communication…to an emphasis on papyrus” (Innis 2003:21). Papyrus, as a ‘space-biased’ medium was light and portable (slide), enabling communication over great distances and soon “an army of scribes” was employed by the government, “charged with the collection and administration of revenues, rents and tributes from the peasants” (Innis 2003:22). Being a scribe was considered an illustrious profession. In fact, in one particular case, Imhotep – a scribe and the designer of the first pyramid at Saqqara, was worshipped as a god following his death (McDermott 2001).

Not only did the shift to papyrus as the main medium of communication allow for the widespread administration and government of the Egyptian populace, the rapid speed with which the scribes could record information on papyrus as opposed to stone, resulted in the simplification of hieroglyphics into a quicker, more cursive form of writing script known as hieratic (slide). However stone had one major advantage over papyrus as a medium of communication – its durability (slide). A significant proportion of the archeological information collected on Ancient Egypt has been from stone monuments, temples, tombs, etc. One only has to examine the destruction of the Alexandria Library to adequately demonstrate the impermanence of papyrus as a means of collecting and storing information. Legend has it that the Library of Alexandria was the most impressive of its kind. Upon its completion, Ptolemy II apparently wrote to the rulers of every state requesting that they donate books to the collection. Eventually the Library not only possessed “a complete collection of Egyptian literature and works on the religions of the ancient
Near East” (Oakes 2002:220), but also contained a major complementation of Greek literature as well. It could also store up to 70 000 papyrus scrolls at any one time. While most of these works were either purchased by or donated to the Library, more drastic actions were sometimes undertaken to procure new items. According to history, every boat that entered the harbour at Alexandria was searched and all books and documents found were confiscated. Once examined and the value of the book determined, it was then decided whether the original book should be given back to the owners or instead substitute it with a copy, keeping the original for the Library’s own collection. The wealth of knowledge this Library contained is almost incalculable and yet it was all lost when the Library was destroyed during the Roman invasion. The second focus of this lecture will be on (slide)...

FOCUS: Robinson and The Origins of Writing

The development of writing was a gradual process. Originally believed to have evolved from pictograms (slide), simple representations of actual objects, it was with the development of agriculture (slide) and the need to maintain accurate trade and supply records that sparked the evolution of writing itself (Robinson 2003). In his essay on the origins of writing, Robinson raises an interesting point – (slide) did the notion of writing spread from Mesopotamia where the earliest examples of writing have been found, or did the concept evolve independently in other cultures? As mentioned previously, evidence does exist that the concept, though not the style, of writing may have spread from Mesopotamia to Egypt, initiating the development of hieroglyphics. Therefore, it is conceivable that this also occurred in other cultures as well. If correct, this theory also adequately illustrates the adaptive nature of writing. As the concept spread, it adapted and evolved to meet the needs and requirements of each civilization, taking on its own structure and style.

Others however, still maintain that writing evolved out of necessity, independent of external influences. Therefore (slide), could the development of writing be a direct result of necessity? After all, if a tribal group establishes itself in a region of agricultural stability, gradually developing a larger population base with the beginnings of its own trade and governmental structure, the ability to record information may soon develop out of absolute necessity. This may explain why many nomadic tribes who never established an agricultural system also never developed the need to construct a formal writing script, instead preferring the use of pictograms on available surfaces. However, as the Ascher’s demonstrate in their essay on the Inca civilization and its use of the Quipu, there are always exceptions to every rule.
Regardless as to whether the actual concept of writing evolved independently or was borrowed from other cultural groups, there is sufficient evidence of various cultures ‘borrowing’ particular writing structures and then building upon them to create a more sophisticated writing style (slide). Robinson (2003) mentions the example of the Phoenicians who developed the original alphabet which consisted only of consonants, that was then borrowed by the Greeks who incorporated vowels into its overall design. The Japanese borrowed the system of Chinese characters and then combined it with a Japanese script to accommodate the different sounds and pronunciations of the Japanese vocabulary.

There now exist approximately 2800 languages in the world, and all are thought to operate on the one overriding principle – that symbols are used to represent various sounds and as such (slide), “all writing systems use a mixture of phonetic and semantic signs” (Robinson 2003:38). Phonetic signs consist of a distinct set of symbols each assigned to a single specific sound. (slide) “The higher the proportion” of phonetic symbols, “the easier it is to guess the pronunciation of a word” (Robinson 2003:38). Yet (slide) is this necessarily an essential component of a writing script? After all, as Robinson (2003:38) states (slide), what “has sound got to do with the actual process of writing and reading?”

Perhaps a more effective writing style is one based on logograms as opposed to phonetics – where entire words are represented by individual symbols. In fact, our society today is filled with such examples of ‘modern hieroglyphics’, as Robinson (2003:38) refers to them. They tell us what to do and what not to do, they warn us, they guide us, but most especially, they provide multi-lingual cultures around the world with a universal and independent communicator (slide). In other words, the aim of modern logograms should be to provide all languages with a common ground.

**Australian Perspective: Aboriginal Art**

To finish this lecture we will examining this topic from an Australian perspective and to do this, we must examine the Indigenous people’s use of art as a medium through which information was conveyed (slide). In particular we will be focusing on their use of art as a means of (slide) “non-verbal communication” (Berndt et al. 1998:40). What becomes apparent upon closer inspection is the absolute complexity of indigenous art. Each piece of Aboriginal artwork (slide) contains numerous layers of information and meaning that may not “necessarily convey the same meaning to all people within a particular culture” (Berndt et al. 1998:40). There are certain details that are
instantly recognizable to all members of the artist’s community group. However, the ability to
decipher an artwork’s deeper meanings and secrets is a skill that must be taught and (slide)
depends on each individual’s age, gender and position within that particular community. In other
words, “Aboriginal art was designed to communicate ideas to specific persons or groups of
persons” (Berndt et al. 1998:41).

Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt (1998:40) use the example of an “Arnhem land mortuary
bone receptacle” to demonstrate this point. The shape of the receptacle, the animal
representations and the emblems used to identify a particular social group would more than likely
be immediately recognized by all members of the community. They would also be able to identify
the social relationships and affiliations of the deceased person and their connection with the
artist/s. It is also more than likely that local onlookers would have been able to recognize the
“name or names of the mythic being or beings associated with the emblematic designs” (Berndt et
al. 1998:40). However, further ‘detailed’ information would only be accessible to someone who
had (slide) “already acquired it during religious revelations on that specific subject” (Berndt et al.
1998:41). This evidence therefore suggests that, like the art of the Ice Age Man, the artwork of
the Indigenous Australians cannot be lightly dismissed as mere aesthetic decorations. Rather, it is
a complex and sophisticated form of communication that enables precise details and information
to be passed on to specific members of particular communities.
REFERENCE LIST


