Written artefacts, transmitted literature and missing evidence: an introduction

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1 Historians and missing evidence

The study of ancient cultures relies on two types of sources, namely archaeological finds – not least of which are written artefacts – and transmitted literature. For cultures with writing, scholars use these sources for reconstructing and interpreting various aspects of society, economy, religion, law, history and literature – or even for *the* history or *the* society of a culture – and increasingly, in more recent times, for exchanges between various cultures. Research is built on available and accessible sources, the number of which has grown exponentially with digital technologies. Sources are the raw material for analysis and interpretation,[1] in order to arrive at a narrative or a theory based on scholars' motives and the standards and expectations of their time. The success of an interpretation ideally relies on the evidence provided, and this evidence, again ideally, combines pertinent sources and cogent reasoning. Controversies may be stimulated by extra-academic factors, but as a rule, if not purely ideological, they concern the evidence presented to the scholarly community in support of a thesis, model or theory. Accepted interpretations are always open to challenge, particularly once new evidence is brought forth, whether based on known or neglected sources or on newly discovered materials.

In principle, our sources are mediated. Transmitted texts are available in editions, and these editions were prepared by scholars working according to the notions and standards of their time. Textual criticism is employed to reconstruct versions as close to their ancient ancestors as possible. Newly discovered manuscripts, whether documentary or non-documentary, may challenge such editions and lead to improved texts that may be overturned by yet further discoveries. Just like the survival of manuscripts, the discovery and safeguarding of ancient sites is dictated largely by chance. Political, socio-economic and geographical factors influence not only what survives underground, but also where excavations may take place. The excavation findings will then be systematised according to contemporary standards and published. These reports, ideally comprising extensive documentation, are the main evidence for any interpretation, since autopsy is time-consuming and not always possible. However, due to research interests as well as limitations of time and funding, archaeological reports are rarely ever complete, and the discov-

1 See Hornblower 2009.

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ery of inscriptions and manuscripts is not always accompanied by precise descriptions of their contexts or the contents of the assemblages in which they were found.

Traditionally, epigraphers were mainly interested in texts, and simply noted graffiti – if at all – without providing their exact location, just as editors often did not even mention the other texts or works contained in a multiple-text manuscript.[2] Thus, the sources we use are shaped by those presenting them, as well as the intellectual vogues of their respective fields, often connected with long-term cultural paradigms or with trends in politics and society, such as nationalism, and reinforced by personal rivalry and competition. The decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphs is a case in point for neglecting evidence due to cultural or political ideas: according to the hierarchy of writing systems at the time, the Mesoamerican characters were supposed to represent the most primitive form of writing, depicting things only – thus the 'alphabet' provided already in 1566 by the notorious Bishop Diego de Landa (1524–1579) was ignored. In the second half of the twentieth century, suggestions by the Soviet linguist Yuri Knorozov (1922–1999) were rejected by the British archaeologist Eric Thompson (1898–1975) who dominated the field in the West, thus delaying decipherment for decades.

Our sources are not innocent in the first place. Even before they are presented to us by modern scholars, they may already have undergone changes in antiquity. Archives were re-sorted and moved, not to mention written artefacts discarded according to unknown principles.[3] Archaeologists excavate both items that were discarded in antiquity and those that were carefully archived or stored in libraries. Today, when the context of discovery is lacking, these written artefacts are treated equally. Furthermore, often missing is reflection on the preservation of written artefacts: was it voluntary or by accident? Cuneiform exercises written by apprentice scribes in the early second millennium were often used as building materials, but they were occasionally studied as coherent archives. Buildings, tombs and other sites were disturbed; texts have been redacted or forged; historical events were tailored to personal or political motives in literary texts. In very rare instances, such as the Pyrrhonic library of Herculaneum, a state of apparent immediacy is preserved, but this state represents only the exact moment it was frozen (if one may say so) in time.[4] We know neither how it came about nor how its originators imagined it might develop in the future. Historians have invented source criticism as a means to unveil the motives prompting their texts' production, and accordingly judge their value for answering research questions. Archaeologists

2 On this concept, see Friedrich and Schwarke 2016.

3 See Friedrich, Hirschler and Michel 2025.

4 See Zarmakoupi 2011. On the phenomenon of the end of archives in Mesopotamia, see the dossier edited by Joannès 1995.

try to 'read' their assemblages through the analysis of the data they have recovered and comparison with similar assemblages. If these contain written artefacts, often discarded ones, the task may become even more complex. However, all interpretation relies on hypotheses that, if commonly accepted, may imperceptibly become dominant paradigms – until they are proven partially or wholly wrong by new evidence. Without evidence, hypotheses are mere opinions.

Since no record, whether literary or archaeological, is complete, we always lack evidence. In order to arrive at interpretations, we need to bridge gaps, connect unrelated data, discover general patterns, and create meaning in spite of missing sources by way of reasoning. Missing sources may either be considered as non-existent or as unavailable, in both cases generating methodological problems with sometimes far-reaching consequences. In the following, three types of missing evidence are discussed under the rubrics of absence, quantity and quality, and the final section is dedicated to the unique case of ancient India. These types are neither comprehensive nor mutually exclusive; they merely serve the heuristic purpose of mapping the vast territory of missing evidence.

2 Absence of evidence: Lost or neglected

If written artefacts of a certain type are completely lost without any mention in the transmitted literature, these sources simply do not exist for us. Only by chance may they surface again and thus open up new avenues for scholarship, as, for example, the discovery of turtle plastrons and ox scapulae bearing writing in China did. Sold as 'dragon bones' to a scholar in 1899, these written artefacts, dating between *c*. 1200 and *c*. 1000 BCE, allowed for the very first glimpses into the ritual and religious world of the Shang, a state in today's Henan province in China, traditionally considered the second Chinese 'dynasty'.[5] While it did not take long to identify the characters as an early form of Chinese writing, the decipherment of cuneiform sources needed much longer because the script had fallen into complete oblivion. Already in the early seventeenth century, the first cuneiform writing was found in Persepolis, but it took two hundred years to decipher Old Persian written in cuneiform. The wide variety of languages written in cuneiform was only understood in the twentieth century.[6] Some knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs had been preserved in the Mediterranean, but due to the European obsession with a purely conceptual system

5 Literary sources mention the use of turtles for divination, but not how it was conducted and that writing was involved; see Keightley 1978.

6 See Lion and Michel 2009.

of writing, decipherment had to wait until Napoleon and Champollion.[7] Just as for cuneiform sources, archaeological campaigns undertaken from the nineteenth century onward unearthed huge corpora of manuscripts and inscriptions, leading to the establishment of the academic disciplines of Egyptology and Assyriology.[8] The fourth ancient culture considered to have developed writing independently was less fortunate. The Spanish conquerors succeeded in destroying almost all the books of the Maya, with only four extant specimens left to us.[9] Loss of manuscripts and texts is the shadow accompanying textual transmission, although intentional destruction is less common than loss by neglect or natural or human-made catastrophes.[10]

In general, most ancient literature and written sources have been irretrievably lost. Regarding ancient Greek and Roman literature, it is only by chance that some of the lost texts have resurfaced on papyri found in the Egyptian desert or excavated at Herculaneum, such as the famous Epicurean library.[11] Many of these losses had already occurred in antiquity, the most famous example probably being the 'works' of Aristotle. What has been transmitted to the present day is actually lecture notes and texts for internal use at his school; most works 'published' by the philosopher himself had been lost already in antiquity, and the texts we have today were transmitted by the Neo-Platonists.[12]

The materiality of the writing supports has played a role, too. While perishable organic supports such as bamboo, papyrus and tree bark only survive under special circumstances, inscriptions on 'hard' materials like bronze or stone were meant for eternity, be it in China or in Rome. Bronze inscriptions were an important part of the epigraphic landscape in the Roman Empire, but just like bronze sculptures, few have survived. The material value of the easy-to-melt bronze led to recycling already in antiquity.[13] Even more relevant for everyday life were the inscriptions on wooden boards, the 'whitened tablets' (*tabulae albatae*) that were used for promulgating laws and other relevant texts.[14] Almost none of these have survived, nor have the wooden boards used in ancient China for similar

7 See Regulski 2022.

8 The discipline of 'Egyptology' was born with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt at the very end of the eighteenth century, followed in 1822 by the decipherment of hieroglyphs by Jean-François Champollion. Renan (1959, 171) was the first to refer to the specialists of cuneiform writing as 'assyriologues' by analogy with Egyptologists.

9 See Foster 2002, 196–197.

10 See the contributions in Kühne-Wespi, Oschema and Quack 2019.

11 See the contributions in Zarmakoupi 2011.

12 See Hatzimichali 2016, 99; see also Primavesi 2024.

13 See Eck 2011.

14 See Eck 1998 and Fischer 2003.

purposes.[15] These written artefacts, including the texts they carry, are usually considered 'ephemeral'. Such is the case, for example, of the wooden tablets coated with wax used from Mesopotamian antiquity to Medieval Europe.[16] By virtue of their ephemerality, the wooden manuscripts discovered in England at the site of the former Roman castle Vindolanda have added a completely new aspect to the study of Roman history.[17] Growing awareness that the very nature and vicissitudes of literary transmission, when available, have obliterated major parts of ancient cultures, new evidence provided by archaeological finds has helped to overcome at least some of the ancient biases. The first chapter of the present volume deals with the lost book culture of the Mayas, the subsequent two with case studies from late antique Christian Ethiopia and Buddhist Central Asia.

Only four amate concertinas, called 'codices' by the experts, survive from the ancient Mayas' rich literary tradition. This is due not only to the fragility of the writing support and environmental conditions, but also to the Spanish conquerors who burnt all they could lay their hands on. However, Christophe Helmke and Kerry Hull demonstrate how a comparative study of epigraphic, archaeological and iconographic sources provides insight into the variety of Maya writings from the first millennium CE that no longer exist today. The Maya codices must have covered a wide range of topics, including the administration of the state, military and economic matters, and even science, as well as more literary and personal works.

Alessandro Bausi discusses the discovery of a medieval manuscript in Gəʿəz that has revealed a new liturgical collection. This collection has made it possible to partially fill some significant textual gaps concerning Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in Ethiopia and Eritrea. In addition, outside views, such as that of Francisco Alvares on Ethiopia in the sixteenth century, reveal aspects invisible to the actors themselves. Such neglected evidence can fill gaps and advance research, but the author also warns against trying to fill *all* the gaps with new evidence from newly discovered sources.

Buddhist literature is found in two Middle Iranian languages from eastern Central Asia: Sogdian, which features translations from Chinese, and Khotanese, including both translations – mainly from Sanskrit – and original works. The Old Khotanese *Book of Zambasta*, a major Mahāyāna Buddhist poem likely to have been composed by the fifth century, survives only in part: one large manuscript of 212 folios and several fragments. Though at least one chapter is missing, overlooked small fragments suggest the text once filled the entire manuscript. Nicholas Sims-Williams

15 See Li Jingrong and Chen Songchang 2021.
16 See Cammarosano et al. 2019.
17 See Bowman 1998.

reminds us that every piece of evidence is valuable, and fragments that are often neglected may contain the key to reconstructing written artefacts and their content.

3 Quantity of evidence: Too little or too much

Historians of ancient cultures could perhaps agree on one point: there is always too little evidence for the topic they are studying or the question they are trying to solve. This not only pertains to cases like the four extant Maya 'codices' that are the only survivors of a once flourishing book culture, but also to the foundations of 'Western' culture. New archaeological discoveries often force us to reconsider established opinions: Vindolanda and the Villa of Papyri have already been mentioned, to which the Oxyrhynchus papyri,[18] the Dead Sea scrolls,[19] the Cairo Genizah[20] and the Uluburun shipwreck may be added.[21] Beyond the Mediterranean, the birch-bark manuscripts from Gandhāra[22] and the continuing discovery of ancient Chinese wooden and bamboo manuscripts are perhaps the best-known examples. In all cases, the new evidence not only unveils hitherto unknown aspects of ancient history, but at the same time makes even clearer how much we miss. This fact is sometimes overlooked by scholars who are naturally enthusiastic about the new materials. Yet another property of the new materials is sometimes overlooked too: they are distributed rather unevenly in time and space, and their growing number is not only a blessing, but also a handicap. Three chapters of the present volume address these issues.

Administrative documentation from the Egyptian Old Kingdom is extremely incomplete, primarily because perishable papyrus was used to record state activities. A few rare sets of papyri, notably from Abusir, Gebelein, Elephantine and, more recently, the port of Wadi el-Jarf, provide evidence of these activities, but they represent only a tiny fraction of the original archives. In a case study, Pierre Tallet introduces the discovery made at Wadi el-Jarf in 2013: the 'great deposit' containing logbooks and workers' accounts relating to the construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza. These documents provide concrete data on the logistics of the Pharaonic state while highlighting the scale of the losses. For a single team and a single season, it is estimated that thousands of papyri were produced, of which only a few fragments remain today.

18 See <https://oxyrhynchus.web.ox.ac.uk/home>, accessed on 18 July 2025.
19 See <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il>, accessed on 18 July 2025.
20 See Rustow 2020 and Jefferson 2022.
21 See Pulak 1998.
22 See Baums 2014.

In contrast, sites in the Near and Middle East have yielded a vast number of cuneiform inscriptions and manuscripts, totalling up to a million written artefacts over a period of more than three millennia. However, as Cécile Michel points out, these artefacts are unevenly distributed over time, space and social groups. The texts were produced in varied and often ephemeral contexts and have survived thanks to the durability of clay. They are the result of ancient and modern human selection, which is linked to archaeological or political choices. This selection, whether deliberate or accidental, distorts our historical understanding by emphasising certain events, sites or elites at the expense of others. While the gradual rediscovery of sites has corrected some of these distortions in historical reconstructions, Mesopotamian history remains fragmentary, marked by 'dark ages' and gaps. Therefore, it is essential to contextualise each discovery and be wary of the illusion of completeness that a large body of texts can create.

Ancient Chinese manuscripts have been excavated from wells and tombs in ever-growing numbers since the 1970s. Much transmitted literature had been shaped by compilers and editors from the late first century BCE onward, thus the new sources dating back to earlier centuries have opened a window into the formative phase prior. In addition, legal manuscripts and large numbers of documents, writing exercises, contracts and other ephemeral writings have been unearthed. Michael Friedrich critically assesses the scholarship on these finds, cautioning against over-interpretation of the new evidence. The absolute number of documents found in the margins of the early empires is a tiny fraction of what must have been produced in late pre-imperial and early imperial chancelleries. Even more problems are posed by the manuscripts found in tombs, since it is often far from clear who had produced them and for what reason. Contrary to what is often assumed, *not* all of them may represent written artefacts used among the living.

4 Quality of evidence: Fragmentary or contradictory

As the subtitle of the present volume suggests, all sources are more or less fragmentary by nature. Even if a text or a document is completely preserved, it always belonged to a larger context, archaeologically and culturally. Written artefacts that have been looted, whether in the past or in modern times, have lost part of their information.[23]

23 See Michel and Friedrich (eds) 2020.

Archaeological and literary sources do not always match. They may complement each other, but also often contradict each other. In some disciplines, the transmitted literature is considered more trustworthy than the findings of archaeological campaigns. Yet in other fields, the situation is quite the reverse, and transmitted sources are interpreted according to pre-existing paradigms that were informed by archaeological data. Contrary to Assyriology and Egyptology, which originated in archaeological findings,[24] disciplines rooted in indigenous scholarly traditions, such as those originating in China or the Latin West, traditionally tend to attach greater weight to transmitted literary sources than to epigraphical evidence or archaeological finds, for example administrative documents. Canonical texts such as the Bible and the Iliad are considered as *the* authoritative sources and studied by themselves. This is related not only to the difficulties of reading and interpreting non-edited sources per se, but also to the division of academic labour. The special skills necessary for epigraphy, sigillography, numismatics and other 'auxiliary sciences' are often delegated to the few specialists still left in universities, libraries and museums.

Disciplinary boundaries can have a disastrous effect on historical reconstructions, if only some of the available sources are considered. When studying the Hellenistic world, for example, it is crucial to examine all epigraphic, papyrological, archaeological, numismatic and literary sources, as these often provide precise and complementary information about the territories conquered by Alexander the Great. This requires the cooperation of scholars who can read Akkadian cuneiform, Aramaic, Egyptian and Greek texts.[25] In a similar vein, the suggestion – made on the basis of Greek papyri from Egypt – that Egyptian funeral practices changed with the arrival of the Romans and their beliefs has been shown to be premature. However, archaeological evidence and an analysis of funerary texts indicate that funerary practices remained closely aligned with the traditions of the pharaohs.[26]

The first chapter in this section is devoted to the nature of Mycenaean society. Linear B tablets, mostly found at Knossos and Pylos and referred to as 'archives', provide administrative but not literary or political records, and scholars often extrapolate from them to construct political maps – despite their limitations and short-term use. This has led to problematic assumptions, such as mapping entire political entities from sparse evidence, even though overlapping palace centres suggest a more unified political structure. Additional evidence from Hittite texts

24 See Michel 2021.
25 See Clancier et al. 2017.
26 See Mascia forthcoming.

referring to a 'Great King' of Ahhiyawa (possibly Achaea/Greece) implies broader Mycenaean political unity, contrary to current archaeological consensus. However, many scholars dismiss these texts due to a lack of corroborating archaeological evidence, rather than questioning whether the archaeological paradigm itself is flawed. Jorrit Kelder argues that disciplinary biases and unexamined assumptions have limited our understanding and calls for a more open, critical approach to the evidence.

The Etruscans were the dominant power in central Italy during the first half of the first millennium BCE, benefiting from control of key metal resources and extensive trade with Greek and Phoenician civilisations, which helped them develop advanced urban centres that far surpassed contemporary Rome. Despite their significance, much about Etruscan history and culture remains unclear due to limited and problematic sources: classical authors offer biased accounts, while the Etruscan inscriptions, mostly funerary and hampered by the still poorly understood language, reveal little about political or historical contexts. Dominique Briquel shows that these two types of evidence rarely overlap, making it difficult to form a coherent picture of Etruscan civilisation. Although some correlations between Etruscan and classical sources offer glimpses of clarity, the overall understanding of the Etruscans remains fragmented and elusive, highlighting the challenges of reconstructing their past.

5 In lieu of a conclusion

Since it is impossible to present a complete or comprehensive assessment of all aspects of missing evidence in the study of all ancient cultures, the present volume closes with a chapter on India that presents a survey of different types of missing evidence for *one* ancient culture. Major religious traditions of Indian culture developed before the introduction of writing, which occurred most probably under the Mauryan emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE. For more than a millennium, orality had been the main medium for the composition and transmission of texts. Orality continued to play a major role, in particular in the religious traditions, and Indian mnemonics remain famous up to the present day. Oskar von Hinüber systematically presents the available sources and those we can only guess they have existed. Most ancient manuscripts have been lost; the same holds true for certain text types, such as administrative documents or royal annals. Transmitted sources point to the existence of archives, and the keeping of annals at royal courts is documented by circumstantial evidence. However, just as for other ancient cultures, there is still neglected evidence to be found in museums and libraries.

The unique case of India, with its very well-preserved oral textual tradition, demonstrates that there is not only one cultural pattern ancient cultures follow. At the same time, it again cautions against drawing far-reaching conclusions necessarily influenced by our own cultural and historical setting.

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