

SAW Seminar: History of Science, History of Text

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Writing, Theory, and Conceptual Change

Abstract: Writing has been argued to create a distinct repertoire of beliefs, concepts, and attitudes that are both discontinuous with prior mental content and core to the emergence of modern science, philosophy, and epistemology broadly conceived. Mature writing has been called a theory of language, an explicit construal of language in graphic form, the material nature of which has the potential to alter the role of linguistic objects in ordinary thinking and reasoning. Claims about writing and mind such as these are consistent with current understandings of mind and culture, and can be clearly differentiated from earlier notions of a nonce cognitive change, a distinction between “kinds” of minds, or a cultural divide between the rational and pre-rational attributable to literacy. A view of writing as theory and its invention as problem solving will be explored, taking early scribal practice in cuneiform culture as evidence