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## Book Review

Geoffrey Yeo, *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies*

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***Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies.*** Geoffrey Yeo. New York: Routledge, 2021. xx, 205 pp. 9780367706272

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At first glance, this book draws more heavily from the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, or historiography than from that of archival science. This, however, is the beauty of the book; *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies*, by Geoffrey Yeo, is an interdisciplinary reference work that weaves together methodologies to create a holistic look at the history of the discipline that would eventually become known as archiving. Yeo, an honorary senior research fellow in the Department of Information Studies at University College London, is well placed to undertake this scholarship, having worked in both archival and records management capacities.

*Record-Making* is an overview of record-making and recordkeeping throughout early history. It is not a history of the book – a genre that is well established – but it examines the history of the record itself – an area that is perhaps less studied. *Record-Making* investigates the origins of memory-making and memory-keeping, the advent of writing, and the way these concepts evolved into the more structured practice of recordkeeping (and the modern concept of archiving itself). Yeo views historical recordkeeping as distinct from modern archiving and distinguishes record-making from recordkeeping, conducting a survey of both concepts and their connection throughout different regions and times. He intentionally separates the two concepts, emphasizing that previous surveys focus more on the practice of recordkeeping and neglect that of record-making, even as archiving itself can be seen to encompass both concepts (p. viii).

Yeo clearly defines the scope of *Record-Making* as covering the early recordkeeping practices of Mesopotamia, Egypt, early China, the Aegean, and the pre-colonial Americas. He acknowledges that the book does not cover every

possible topic and region, even when accounting for its broad scope. *Record-Making* is generally organized chronologically; however, as some regions experienced different developments at different times, Yeo allows for fluidity in this organizational structure. Chapters one and two explore the advent of different forms of record-making and recordkeeping and define exactly what constitutes a record, while chapters three, four, and five go into detail on a regional basis, outlining advancements in recordkeeping specific to the different regions. Chapters six and seven examine literacy, orality, and trust in the authenticity of records while expanding upon the effects of different cultural and societal needs and pressures on recordkeeping. The final chapter opens a discussion about the relevance of current archival theory to ancient practice and vice versa. In this way, the book is roughly organized conceptually, regionally, and chronologically while allowing for fluidity among chapters.

Comprehensive historical surveys of this kind that come to mind include Ernst Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World*, written in 1972, and Paul Delsalle's *A History of Archival Practice*, written in 1998 and translated into English in 2018. In the last several years, attention has been paid to early modern archiving practices in works such as *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information, and Political Record-Keeping, 1400–1700*, by Randolph C. Head, published in 2019, and *Archives and Information in the Early Modern World*, edited by Kate Peters, Alexandra Walsham, and Liesbeth Corens and published in 2018. Yeo's work fills a substantial gap in the literature; it provides an updated and expanded study of ancient archival practices and examines recordkeeping practices of regions and cultures within and beyond Europe. Stating that previous works such as Posner's focused mainly on written works and therefore began their historical surveys with the advent of the written word, Yeo addresses non-written records in addition to written records in *Record-Making*. Yeo highlights Posner's original work as a "landmark in its day," but acknowledges that (like any academic work) its contents reflect the scholarly perspective of its day and, as such, can be considered outdated (p. viii). The literature was overdue for an update, and Yeo has stepped in to do just that.

In the introduction to the 1998 French edition of *A History of Archival Practice*, Delsalle notes that the "crisis of identity" experienced by archivists may be due to the "lack of a reference framework," and that knowing where archivists came

from and where they are now is vital to obtaining a clear idea of the future.<sup>1</sup> Posner, too, explains that “archivists must feel a need to explore the origins of their profession, to understand the circumstances and forces that have determined its evolution, and . . . to anticipate and prepare for the future.”<sup>2</sup> I agree with this sentiment; knowing where you came from can help inform where you go next. In line with this reasoning, Yeo’s updated overview of this history of practice contributes to the ongoing formation of professional archival identity.

Yeo acknowledges the holism needed to conduct such a survey throughout *Record-Making* and proceeds to draw from different theoretical backgrounds and professions. My personal academic background is in anthropology, so this book was a particular joy for me to read: it tapped into my different theoretical backgrounds, acknowledging the value in interdisciplinary collaboration – in particular, that between anthropology, archaeology, historiography, and of course, archival theory. That being said, Yeo emphasizes the fact that *Record-Making* was written from the perspective of an archivist with archival audiences in mind, and as such, the book reflects Yeo’s own perspective and theories. Yeo draws specifically from his characterization of records as *persistent representations* of events or activities; his definition provides part of the conceptual framework for *Record-Making*. He explains that records as persistent representations can be *iconic* or *conventional* – in other words, they can visibly resemble the things they represent, or they can lack that resemblance and instead rely on agreed conventions (p. x). Yeo explains that most of the records discussed in *Record-Making* are conventional due to the nature of ancient recordkeeping (through methods such as knots on cords, notches on sticks, and incisions on bones).

He goes on to state that *Record-Making* represents just one way of exploring early recording practices, and that there is significant scope left for further studies, to be done from different disciplines as well as additional archival viewpoints (p. xvii). This fact is simultaneously both the strength and the weakness of *Record-Making*. The book is an excellent overview of the topic; however, due to the broadness of the subject, there is much left to analyze. It is simply not possible to cover every region, timeline, or perspective in one book.

Yeo acknowledges the danger of using modern concepts and theories in historical interpretations, stating that “we must be cautious about claims of continuity

1 Paul Delsalle, *A History of Archival Practice*, trans. Margaret Proctor (New York: Routledge, 2018), xi.

2 Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (1972; repr., Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 1.

between ancient and modern practices” (p. 170). He goes on to maintain that “in examining early practices from a present-day viewpoint, we must take care not to assimilate the concerns, needs and methods of early societies too close to modern norms” (p. 187) – recognizing that recordkeeping and memory-keeping priorities and practices change over time and that limitations in understanding past motivations will always exist (p. 170). I agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment. While a driving force behind researching the advent of archival practice is understanding and examining its evolution, not giving weight to the actual change involved in that evolution and instead projecting modern practice and theory onto ancient practice is concerning. We can make broad connections and hypotheses regarding ancient recordkeeping theory, but positing the *whys* of ancient practice based on modern concepts needs to be done with a healthy dose of skepticism and context. Modern scholars can and do make assumptions about historical motivations based on current practice, and while there are certainly bases for these assumptions, one must recognize that historical motivations may differ completely from contemporary ones. But issues with recordkeeping and the persistence of records have always existed; at the very least, it can be heartening to see that these concerns are not unique to our own time.

Yeo argues that, much like in the subjects of modern recordkeeping, a significant amount of business recorded in ancient records was conducted orally rather than through the creation of written records. This reliance on orality rather than on physical records means that, the loss of ancient physical records over time aside, what remains of the record captures only a fraction of the information about how different ancient cultures and societies functioned. Indeed, the advent of the written word and the adoption of the written record did not eliminate orality entirely, and the newer type of record did not supersede the traditional, trusted forms of memory-keeping (p. 135). And it is worth remembering that “the ability to make records is not the same as . . . the ability to write” (p. 123).

Overall, Yeo questions whether contemporary archival thinking can be applied to the analysis of ancient and historical archival practice (p. 181), and this question can be easily turned around: can knowledge of historical practice be applied to modern practice? Knowledge of historical practice – however theoretical – can be useful as a way of situating and examining current and future issues with archival practice in context. Indeed, learning from past practices is a common thread in the different disciplines Yeo draws from, including history

and anthropology. Yeo unequivocally states that “all societies that have discovered a need for records have faced broadly similar challenges of how best to achieve persistence and representation and how to maintain, protect, preserve, and use records most effectively, within their own cultural settings,” and as such, we can learn from these historical practices when moving forward in our own (p. 188). This book is a valuable look into the history of recordkeeping and has reopened the door for more scholars to examine the development of ancient archival practice.