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LISTS AND REGISTERS
IN WRITTEN AND ORAL TRADITION

Introduction

The differences between speech and writing have been a subject of scholarly interest for many decades.[1] These forms of communication differ from each other in the construction of a message, in the durability and stability of the communication, and in its dependence on the context. Speech is immaterial, ephemeral, connected to the specific context of its emergence; it also enables us to interact and to receive feedback information. Writing, on the contrary, is available physically, is durable, but is also detached from its context and prevents us from getting a direct response. It has an impact on the message's construction – written records have to contain all the necessary information which can replace and supplement the context. The written text has to be precise and to speak for itself. Therefore, although lacking the possibility of using non-linguistic tools (such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.), they may seem to be more complete than oral utterance. The aim of this article is to show that ancient lists,

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[1] Among the extensive literature, it is worth mentioning: LURIA 1976; GOODY 1977; ONG 1982; GOODY 1986; HAVELOCK; OLSON 1994.

registers and catalogues are derived from both the oral and written traditions, and their discrete nature can be explained by their separate origins. Paradoxically, in specific cases written records have proved to be more incomplete than records which have survived through oral transmission.

Making lists can be linked to the earliest human literary activities.[2] They were created for administrative, religious and economic purposes from the 4th millenium BC in the Near East and the Mediterranean and at least from the 2nd millenium BC in the Aegea. The administrative lists contained registers of goods and commodities (animals, food, fabrics, etc.) intended for sale, distribution or offering in a temple. The event lists located the most important events during the reigns of individual kings. The lexical lists assigned people, animals and other elements of nature to the specific categories, taking into account the relationships between listed objects and their hierarchy.[3]

The content of the lists was dictated by the demands of the economy and social relations; the structure arose due to a medium such as writing. The construction of the written lists was different from that of oral messages: they were not arranged according to syntax; nor was there a subject-verb-object arrangement, but single nouns or nouns followed by numerals. Registers did not try to reflect the mechanisms of speech, but they rather recorded particular words, using schemes created especially for such a purpose. Users of these records were aware of the artificiality of such constructions and they recognized the difference between real language and written records. John Baines quotes an Egyptian story (*The Tale of Two Brothers*, c. 1200 BC), in which a shepherd, who is carrying goods, is asked what he is carrying. He answers: "wheat: 3 sacks, barley: 2 sacks; total: 5". This is an obvious im-

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[2] GOODY, 1977, 68, 70, 75, 81.
[3] For these kinds of lists in the social context, *vide* GOODY 1977, 74–111.

itation of the recording of economic data, instead of a natural utterance, which would be expected by the recipients. Contrasting the earlier scene of casual conversation with the evident accounting jargon must have resulted in a comical effect.[4] The difference between oral enumeration and the written list is so great that one cannot mistake one for the other. Registers gather isolated words, "separated not only from the wider context […], but separated too from one another. […] lists are simple, abstract and categorised".[5]

Written registers

In Bronze Age Mesopotamia a very wide range of data was recorded: legal transactions, sales, rental agreements, loans, marriage contracts, adoptions, wills, salaries of officials, etc. Registers of taxpayers were prepared for tax purposes in the form of population censuses and lists of births. Temple resources, incomes and expenses were grouped as registers of temple economy. Moreover, thousands of words were collected and organized in the lexical lists, the most famous of which was the so-called "Sumerian king-list", first written down at the beginning of the 2nd millenium BC and rewritten many times over the subsequent centuries.[6] It had a structure of a simple enumeration, listing only the names and number of years of each king's rule, as seen in the following excerpt:

> After the kingship descended from heaven, the kingship was in Eridug. In Eridug, Alulim became king; he ruled for 28800 years. Alaljar ruled for 36000 years. 2 kings; they ruled for 64800 years. Then Eridug fell and the kingship was taken to Bad-tibira. In Bad-tibira, En-men-lu-ana ruled for 43200 years. En-men-gal-ana ruled for 28800 years. Dumuzid, the shepherd, ruled for 36000 years. 3 kings; they ruled for 108000 years. Then Bad-tibira fell

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[4] BAINES 1983, 575.
[5] GOODY 1977, 81, 88.
[6] JACOBSEN 1939; OPPENHEIM 1977, 145, 230 n.; MICHALOWSKI 2006, 81–85.

(?) and the kingship was taken to Larag. In Larag, En-sipad-zid-ana ruled for 28800 years. 1 king; he ruled for 28800 years. Then Larag fell (?) and the kingship was taken to Zimbir. In Zimbir, En-men-dur-ana became king; he ruled for 21000 years. 1 king; he ruled for 21000 years. Then Zimbir fell (?) and the kingship was taken to Curuppag. In Curuppag, Ubara-Tutu became king; he ruled for 18600 years. 1 king; he ruled for 18600 years. In 5 cities 8 kings; they ruled for 241200 years. Then the flood swept over.[7]

Another Sumerian list was *The Standard List of Professions*, collecting approximately 120 most important professions in the state, prepared in the Uruk IV period and copied even 1500 years later.[8] Centuries of rewriting these words in unchanged form – despite inevitable changes in social structure – blurred the meaning of most of them. We can only assume that they are ordered from the highest position at the top to the less significant:

NAMEŠDA,
NÁM KAB,
NÁM DI,
NÁM NÁM,
NÁM URU[9].

Sumerians listed not only their historical kings or royal titles, but they also wrote down important events, deaths, natural disasters, plagues, wars, battles and religious ceremonies. These words were presented as laconically as registers of gods, people, animals, stones, trees, fields, officials, etc.[10] Although in Mesopotamia lexical lists were especially differentiated, similar records were created in the whole of the Near East in the Bronze Age.[11]

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[7] ETCSL 1-39.
[8] VAN DE MIEROOP 2007, 34, Chart 2.1.
[9] *Ibidem.*
[10] WISEMAN 1970, 44 n.
[11] Traces of such practice can also be found in some parts of the Old Tes-

In Egypt taxes, paid in nature (as grain, cattle, wine, fabrics, but also human labour), were cumulated in royal and temple magazines and documented in official records.[12] From the beginning of the 2nd millenium BC Egyptians also prepared *onomastica*, "catalogues of things arranged under their kinds"[13]. The oldest known *onomasticon* (from the late Middle Kingdom) was found in Ramesseum; another was composed by the scribe Amenemope (20th to 22nd Dynasty). The *Onomasticon* of Amenemope distinguishes elements of heaven and earth, social groups, towns of Egypt, cereals, drinks, building, etc. Below we can observe an extract, listing people ranked according to their age:

295 adult man (*s*),
296 youth (*mnH*),
297 old man (*iAw*),
298 adult woman (*st*),
299 young woman (*nfrt*)[14].

Lists of commodities delivered to the palace or semi-finished products handed over to craftsmen were also prepared in any economies based on the redistribution of goods (as in Crete in the 2nd millenium BC). The structure of such lists was simple and very similar in the whole of the Mediterranean – isolated nouns were followed by numerals or – as in the Linear B script – also clarified by ideograms. Below is the tablet from Knossos (KN Ca 895+fr. = V–C 82, DU 03):

1. i-qo *EQU^f* 5 *EQU^m* po-ro *EQU* [
2. o-no *EQU^f* 3 po-ro *EQU* 2 *EQU^m* [

what can be translated as:

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tament: the whole *Book of Numbers*, *Genesis* 5 with Adam's genealogy or *Genesis* 10 with the list of Noe's progenies).

[12] GOODY 1986, 64.

[13] GARDINER 1947, 5.

[14] <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/literature/onomgroups.html>, [access: 31.01.2016].

1. horses: 5 mares, 4 stallions, [X] foals [
2. donkeys: 3 mares, 2 colts, 4 donkeys [[15].

Oral enumerations

Recording lists of goods or people seems to be directly con-
nected to writing. However, one can notice two issues incon-
sistent with such an assumption. Firstly, it is obvious that in
Mesopotamia there was a need to organize data even before
the emergence of writing in the 4th millenium BC. The system
of clay tokens enables the collection and retention of data relat-
ing to commercial transactions or inheritance issues. Tokens,
representing goods or animals, were stored in clay envelopes
which were associated with particular transactions. They ful-
filled a similar function to later registers and had a similar con-
struction – even if it was three-dimensional. Therefore, writing
could not have led to the invention of lists and registers. Sec-
ondly, in epics, which were based on the oral tradition, there
were also catalogues and enumerations, which are not only in-
tegrally incorporated into the works, but also play an important
role in the plot. If one associates the nature of the catalogue
with writing, it must be puzzling to find them in the epics. They
may also be treated as late inclusions, added to longer poems
already in the process of textualization. However, the construc-
tion of the *Catalogue of Ships* (Hom. *Il.* II 494–759) and its
contents indicate that it is rather a pre-Homeric recitation in-
cluded in the epic. Some parts of this recitation, e.g. formulae
describing geographical areas, may even be dated to the 13th
century BC.[16] In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* there are both narra-
tive catalogues (*Catalogue of Ships*: Hom. *Il.* II 494–759; Trojan
heroes: *Il.* II 816–877; Zeus' lovers: *Il.* XIV 315–328; competitors:
Il. XXIII 288–351; women who were mothers of heroes: *Od.*
XI 235–327), and enumerating lists (Greek heroes: *Il.* VII 162–

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[15] BARTONEK 2003, 507.
[16] PAGE 1959, 132, 134; MINTON 1962, 205.

168; VIII 261–267; XI 301–303; XXIII 836–838; Trojan heroes: *Il*. V 577–578; V 705–710; XI 56–60; XIII 789–794; XVI 694–696; XVII 215–218; XXI 209–210; XXIV 248–251; rivers: *Il*. XII 19–23; Nereids: *Il*. XVIII 39–49; citadels: *Il*. IX 149–152; spoils: *Il*. XI 677–681; Phaeacians: *Od*. VIII 111–119; suitors: *Od*. XXII 241–243).[17]

The Catalogue of Ships is far too long to cite it in its entirety, but the beginning shows its structure:

> Now will I tell the captains of the ships and the ships in their order. Of the Boeotians Peneleos and Leïtus were captains, [495] and Arcesilaus and Prothoënor and Clonius; these were they that dwelt in Hyria and rocky Aulis and Schoenus and Scolus and Eteonus with its many ridges, Thespeia, Graea, and spacious Mycalessus; and that dwelt about Harma and Eilesium and Erythrae; [500] and that held Eleon and Hyle and Peteon, Ocalea and Medeon, the well-built citadel, Copae, Eutresis, and Thisbe, the haunt of doves; that dwelt in Coroneia and grassy Haliartus, and that held Plataea and dwelt in Glisas; [505] that held lower Thebe, the well-built citadel, and holy Onchestus, the bright grove of Poseidon; and that held Arne, rich in vines, and Mideia and sacred Nisa and Anthedon on the seaboard. Of these there came fifty ships, and on board of each [510] went young men of the Boeotians an hundred and twenty. (transl. by A.T. Murray 1924)

Although this passage seems to list only the names of heroes who came to Troy, it also tells their stories, or at least adds some information which helps to identify or better define them. The list of Nereids is less similar to a narrative and its structure is different:

> There were Glauce and Thaleia and Cymodoce, [40] Nesaea and Speio and Thoë and ox-eyed Halië, and Cymothoë and Actaeä and Limnoreia, and Melite and Iaera and Amphithoe and Agave, Doto and Proto and Pherousa and Dynamene, and Dexamene and Amphinone and Callianeira, [45] Doris and Pynope and glorious Galatea, Nemertes and Apseudes and Callianassa, and there

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[17]MINCHIN 1996, 4 n.

were Clymene and Ianeira and Ianassa, Maera and Orithyia and
fair-tressed Amatheia, and other Nereids that were in the deep of
the sea. (transl. by A.T. MURRAY 1924)

These lists (and many others, not only in Homer, but also in
Hesiod and the fragmentary preserved Cyclic Poets) are un-
doubtedly prepared for an oral performance and their struc-
ture is well thought out. They list personal or place names,
goods or objects, but their structure differs from the written
records.

Incomplete written registers; complete oral enumera-tions

The structure of lists and catalogues in the oral tradition is
different from economic inventories, not only because of their
differing functions and content. Their elements are not isolated
and decontextualized, but connected to each other and to the
subsequent narrative (a list of the heroes is an inventory of
persons who will appear later in the epic). Written registers
pull individual words out of context and place them into a new
arrangement according to established criteria. Catalogues of
oral origin accumulate information on various levels. Names
of Nereids or Phaeacians are not only arranged according to
the dynamic rhythm and assonance, but they are connected to
the sea because of the nature of these groups. Oral lists are
also prepared and organized in a similar manner to oral epic in
general – they use formulae, alliteration, cumulation, enumer-
ation, rhythm and assonance.[18] Even if the oral enumerations
are separated from their context and analyzed as isolated pas-
sages, they are still narrative stories, or at least compositional
wholes. One may not know all the names and characters, but
the story itself is coherent and understood. The structure of
written lists is deprived of these elements which could make
them complete, so they need more additional and external in-

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[18] *Ibidem*, 11 n.

formation to restore their original form. The story or the oral list is already complete.

These catalogues also have a different purpose from the written records. The durability of writing helps to consolidate and store information which is important to a society. The cumulation of information in oral epic serves in addition as a set of data, but it also provides an opportunity to amaze listeners with the unusual memory of the singer and to impress them with his artistry. Such an enthusiastic reception was described by Vasilij Radlov, who noted the rapturous response of the Kyrgyz audience during the performance of a catalogue in poetry. This reaction show the audience's appreciation for the difficult enumeration, which was made without any mistakes.[19]

Conclusions

Regardless of the relationships between written record and the register form, writing was attractive for early accounting because it was considered to be more reliable and durable, it required no eyewitnesses, and it allowed the preservation of data from more than one transaction at the same time. It proved to be useful while noting the results of repeated observations, such as the changing arrangement of planets. One could store them and draw conclusions from long-term observations and records. Such records were also more accurate and they cannot be distorted as easily as those passed down via oral transmission. For these reasons written lists are often regarded as belonging rather to the early epoch of writing, than to oral tradition.[20] The natural form for the oral epics seems to be a story, narrativity, which reflects the speech and concentrates on the plot, not on the enumeration. Lists and registers do not appear to fit the logic of language, but their presence in

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[19]CHADWICK 1940, 185; MINCHIN 1996, 5.

[20]*Vide* GOODY, 1977, 74–111. It is, however, worth mentioning that Walter Ong has noticed that lists contain features which are commonly linked to spoken language: ONG 1982, 97.

the oral tradition and the existence of pre-writing systems of organizing data indicate that in fact they do. Furthermore, lists composed orally are more embedded in the broader context, which makes them more complete and understood. The phenomenon of creating lists is similar both in the case of speech and writing, but the difference results from the fact that they are expressed by two separate codes. Writing, as concrete and 'frozen' from the moment of recording, must be supported by additional words. If one removes the context from the written register, it will remain only a collection of individual words, but they can be completed by the knowledge of persons who are aware of the right context. On the other hand, spoken constructs cannot be limited to single nouns and numerals and even in the simple form of an enumeration they strive for narrativity. The oral list must be narrative and understood by itself because it cannot be performed without grammatical elements and there is no possibility of supplementing it. Narrative lists, registers and catalogues in epics are not late inclusions or the effect of the impact of writing. On the contrary – their narrativity is proof of their oral origin.

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to show that ancient lists, registers and catalogues, even if concerning similar issues, are differentiated depending on whether they derive from the oral or written tradition. By comparing oral and written records I aim to present the causes of the differences. Oral lists are narrative and semantically complete. Written registers are strongly contextual and consist only of necessary words. Therefore the narrativity of catalogues or registers should be treated as proof of their oral origin.

Keywords: orality, written records, lists, registers.
Słowa kluczowe: oralność, zapisy, listy, rejestry.