THE AMARNA LETTERS: A WEB OF INTERACTION

Diane Harris Cline
George Washington University

> *"So societies appear to be made up of humans interacting with each other, forming groups and associations, entering into various forms of relationship with each other, forming governments and exercising power. It has long been accepted that material things are involved in this process… But material things do more than facilitate. They tie webs of interaction with dependence…"[1]*

This brief paper presents possible research potential for studying the Amarna letters from the vantage points of sociological and anthropological theories, specifically Actor-Network Theory, Entanglement, and Materiality studies. These perspectives all examine social relationships that depend on material objects, where things are part of, even agents in, the social network. No better example can be found from antiquity than the Amarna tablets of the New Kingdom. Many have written about the clay tablets themselves, the types of clays, and the way they were fired. Others have written of the scribes, the education they received, the languages they learned. Scholars have studied the messengers, their training and habits, the roads they travelled. Still others have excavated the chambers where the archives were discovered. Thus a full picture of the systems and contexts for clay tablets is available in the Amarna letters for this kind of experimental analysis.

The Amarna letters permit us to witness social networks inside the Egyptian state not just from the texts themselves but from the physical process of making and delivering the clay tablets, too. This entanglement of humans and things is the subject of examination for some anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and historians. Let us try to tease out the entanglements of things and humans that made the Egyptian administration most effective.

Let us start with the tablets themselves. Take the study by Yuval Goren, Israel Finkelstein, and Nadav Na'Aman.[2] Through mineralogical and chemical analyses of samples from over 300 tablets housed in museums in Berlin, London, Oxford, and Paris, the project aimed at pinpointing their geographic origin and clarifying the geographic history of the ancient Near East. The study shows that from the tablets received at Amarna from all the twenty or so vassal states in ancient Canaan, basically only three clay types were used. That led them to suggest that there were three Egyptian administrative centers, like consulates, in Beth She'an, Gaza, and Sumer in Lebanon.[3] Imagine if one of the vassal kings wanted to send a message, he needed only to send someone, or go himself, to the closest consulate, where an Egyptian scribe would translate the letter, inscribe it on clay, fire it locally, and send it via diplomatic pouch to Amarna. The tablets enabled communication between the center and periphery.

At the three Canaanite centers, as messengers arrived from Canaanite kingdoms, scribes wrote tablets for delivery to Egypt. When this system was brand new, symbolically we might observe that a Canaanite messenger who would have travelled to Egypt now only has to travel to the closest consulate with his memorized message, perhaps written on more ephemeral material like leather. There at the consulate his message would be inscribed on clay and then combined with other messages for delivery by a consolidated diplomatic pouch, carried by Egyptians. A Canaanite city gained efficiency by this centralized system but no longer needed scribes who could write on clay tablets. They perhaps lost the prestige of hand delivery and a royal palace's attention upon arrival. Egypt gains control of the document delivery earlier in the process, since from the moment the message was inscribed, it was already in Egyptian custody. The consulate system, which appears to be centered on efficiency, now looks like a political power play for Egypt.

It is the way humans are engaged with these material things that is the focus of attention in materiality studies.[4] Human dependence on such things and the care we take of them speaks of human-thing entanglement, or what Hodder calls Human-Thing dependence.[5] We can observe social practices and symbolic decision-making tied up with the material objects.[6] We might want to think of an object's properties, qualities, or affordances as well as the

"sociology of associations" between the object, other artifacts, and their human makers and users.[7]

Human-thing interactions can be studied as technical production lines or behavioral chains (or *chaines operatoires*) across the lifetime of the object from manufacture through use to being buried or discarded.[8] When we observe the technological processes involved in the manufacture of the objects, we see a great investment in human activity. The activities of manufacture had to be organized interdependently, with all functions being important. Without the wood gatherer there could be no firing of the kiln. The specialists had to coordinate the timing of delivery in order to get a final product.

In Figure 1 I have imagined the *chaine operatoire* of a clay tablet.

In this *chaine operatoire* for an Amarna tablet, we see clusters that form around the gathering of the raw materials (clay, wood), then the place where the two raw materials come together (the kiln), the humans who manipulate the raw materials through technologies to create the tablets, the social and political setting where the scribe writes on the tablet, and the immediate afterlife once the tablet is sent on its way. Each material object could have sub-*chaines operatoires*; for example, the stylus requires a raw material gatherer, a wood carver, and a merchant or intermediary who brings it to the palace. The horse has caretakers, people who feed and groom it, and so on. Built out in this way, the chart would be even more intricate. Now multiply all this activity by the number of centers where tablets were archived and manufactured, and we see an economy of human-thing interdependence. People made their living supplying activities and needs related to tablet production. A social, economic, and technological world underneath the tablets emerges. Without the tablets, people would not have the same social networks or work together the way they did. Society would be different and altered without the physical tablets, both inside Egypt and abroad. These artifacts "lie at the heart of the systems of thought and practices of their makers and users."[9]

We may look at the archive as collocated objects in an assemblage. The degree of homogeneity or individual difference may reflect control or centralization. Anthropologists speak of a Techno-Complex in which choices are mediated through social interactions and norms.[10] If we add the cognitive, we imagine what those ancient makers and end-users were thinking and feeling as they held or used these ancient artifacts.[11] A package of unconscious non-verbal messages were sent with the text, via a highly regular and consistent performance of practices related to making and delivering these objects. The experience of receiving a tablet or sending one is blended with memories, reactions, feelings, and intentions. The artifact has agency in the sense that it provokes human reaction and response.[12]

Each individual tablet has its own lifespan, or cultural biography.[13] From the moment someone extracted clay from a riverbed and transported it to an administrative center, to the display of the found tablet in a museum some 3,400 years later, some of the Amarna tablets have had extraordinarily long lives. In our own day, we excavate these fragile material things, catalog them, transcribe them, restore and conserve them, and publish and display them. We remain mindful that other humans in the 14th century BCE procured the clay, translated and inscribed them, fired them usually above 350 degrees Centigrade (700 degrees Fahrenheit) so that the letters could not be tampered with, and then they were given to a messenger, who carried them, traveled with them, slept with them under his head so they would not be stolen, never letting them out of his sight, and finally delivered them to the target. On both sides of the time scale they were and remain precious objects.

Disruptive technological innovations affect us now as we move fully into the digital age, with jobs that center on physical objects with writing on them disappearing (consider the economic disruptive impact on copy shops, post offices, and bookstores, for example). The economies around written texts in Late Bronze Age Egypt were remarkably stable for a long period of time, until they were not.
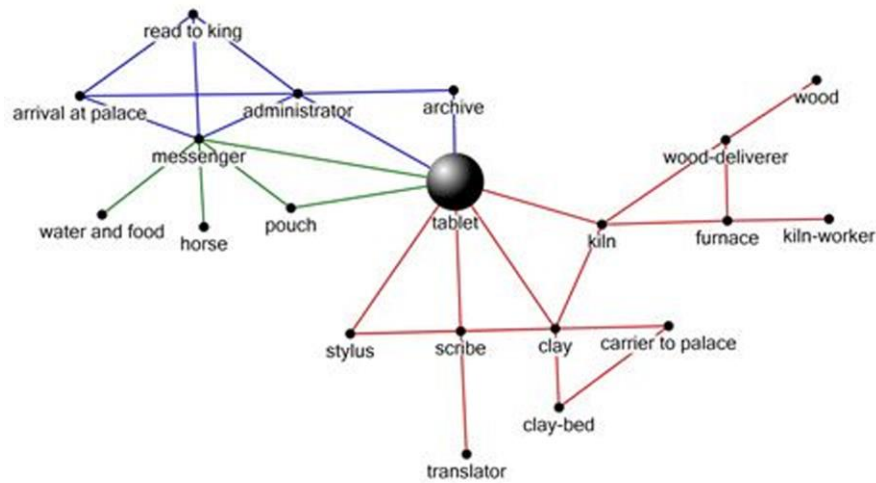
Figure 1: A *chaine operatoire* for a clay tablet used in royal correspondence.

NOTES

1   Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* West (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 111.

2   Y. Goren, I. Finkelstein, and Nadav Na'Aman, *Inscribed on Clay: Provenance Study of the Amara Letters and Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, 2004).

3   Goren, Finkelstein, and Na'Aman.

4   Pierre Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-verbal Communication* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012), 18.

5   Hodder, 88.

6   Dragos Gheorghiu, "The Emergence of Pottery," in Andrew Jones (ed.), *Prehistoric Europe: Theory and Practice* (Chichester, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 168.

7   Carl Knappett, "Materiality," in Ian Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 189–191; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

8   Jones, 167; Lemmonier, 546; Marcia-Anne Dobres, *Technology and Social Agency : Outlining a Practice Framework for Archaeology* (Oxford, UK ; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 173.

9   Lemonnier, 13.

10   Jones, 169.

11   Knappett, 197–199.

12   Latour, 63–86.

13   Lemonnier, 16.