INTRODUCTION

Making a Mark

Stephen Houston and John Bodel

Let us begin with myths, if only to swat them down. There are the claims that systems of writing are committed to transparency and precise records of sound; that the target is the language behind such orderly marks; that readers, not viewers, matter most; and that meaning of a complex, organized sort is best communicated by phonic graphs (e.g., Sampson 1985: 27; see also Drucker 2014; Hudson 1995: 32–33, for the origin of these ideas in an "ideology of openness"). But what if the vehicle were as important as its passengers? What if embellishments mattered deeply, if hidden writing, slow to produce, slow to read, the opposite of hurried cursives, played as enduring a role as more accessible graphs? And what if meaningful marks did continuing service alongside records of spoken language? This book zeroes in on hidden writing and alternative systems of notation. It attends to writing that, by its formal intricacy, deflects attention from language. It aims at graphs or notations that target meaning by direct entrée, without passing through records of sound. What matters in these graphic systems is useable, readily accessed meaning.

At times, scholarship expresses a disdain for slow writing and marking systems that do not traffic in sound. The first, hidden or slow writing – and its necessary corollary, slow reading – involves a degree of delayed legibility, even a form of puzzling that impedes the efficient extraction of meaning. Generally, the alphabet tends to rule, not the "purely pictorial or logographic" forms of writing that tax our "poorly equipped" memory (e.g., Dehaene 2009: 189).

Scholarly disquiet with elaborate notations may even articulate a moral point: that ornament, such as that reviled by the modernist architect Adolf Loos, leads to wasteful expense and "backwardness or degeneration" (Loos 1970 [1913]: 22).

The second, marking systems, are often understood as pre-steps to "full writing." To some scholars, they strain under their imprecision, eventually giving way to the alphabet that lies at the end of any successful experimentation with graphs (a miscellany of such opinion appears in Gelb 1963: 13, 24–51; Sacks 2003: 5; for Saussure 1966: 23, writing "exists for the sole purpose of representing" language; cf. Harris 1995: 74–75, 77, 155–57). The relation between language and writing can be seen as abusive or unfair, in that, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, a certain violence is done to the former by the latter; as an incomplete representation, writing simply fails to deliver on its presumed function, to record sound (Joseph 2012: 356). Moreover, "maximum efficiency" arises from systems that can be learned with alacrity. These, especially the unadorned alphabet, promise the broadest understanding by readers (Hegel 2010 [1817]: annotation to section 459; cf. Ferraris 2013: 211–13). They offer "spreadability" across cultures and avoid any need to "accumulate symbols" (Sacks 2003: 6, 7, 10). The overt contrast is with systems of recording that emphasize the medium as much as the message: a Maya hieroglyph, the embellished, decorative scripts of early China, the enigmatic writing of Pharaonic Egypt. These are said to have a "juxtaposition of notions but not . . . a language capable of clearly imparting new information" (Martin 1994: 10). Fogged by delusion, users of these systems labor under the burden of "animism" and a pictorialism "ill-equipped to discriminate between the reality of the signified and the signifier" (Martin 1994: 26; the philosopher Jane Bennett goes so far as to call these ideas about animism "discredited philosophies of nature," a libel that might surprise practitioners of Shintō and its premises of *kami* power in all things [Bennett 2010: xviii]).

The "slow food" movement is by now a firm fixture on the alimentary landscape (Petrini 2003), as is the broader directive to slow everything . . . down (Honoré 2004). The pleasure of a slow-cooked meal, meticulously prepared and enjoyed at a leisurely pace, matches the enjoyment of slow writing and reading. Arguments about the efficiency of writing resonate with our time of Big Data and the routine ebb and flow of petabytes or yet larger chunks of information. But the luxuriant delight in ornamented text, at times so complex as to be hidden in plain sight, is not a pleasure to be ignored. Sometimes written texts should be understood as records to be witnessed, not just read (Lurie 2011: 31). They may entice, exclude, protect or curse by their talismanic presence, project a bold display, even to illiterates – there is much emotion here, from fear to aesthetic joy and audacious displays of virtuosity. The existence of text is sometimes more important than its direct or effortless

legibility. Indeed, effort is the point. Not a few scripts were meant to summon spirits, remain opaque to all but the uninitiated, invoke revelatory meanings behind and beyond the writing itself, and confer special status on the originator. Such existed in Suriname, Guinea-Bissau, and among the Hmong of Southeast Asia and Shakers of North America, the latter in a graphic form of glossolalia, the speaking in tongues during religious ecstasy (Déléage 2018a, 2018b; Kelly 2018).

The fact is, humans are sufficiently resourceful to use many forms of graphic communication. They are "free to draw upon other modes of communication as structural models," whether language-based or not (Harris 1995: 156; see Boone 2000: 31–38; Powell 2009: 18, 51, for comparably expansive understandings). Furthermore, as Derrida argued persuasively long ago, in critiquing the rigid structuralism of Saussure, graphic signs, so far from being secondary to and derivative of oral speech, are legitimate autonomous signifiers that observe their own internal logic and are worthy of their own humanistic science, of "Grammatology" or "Cultural Graphology" (Derrida 1967; Fleming 2016) or "Ichnology" (the study of traces; Ferraris 2013: 175–246). The sum total of graphs in use in any one place and time has been aptly described by Armando Petrucci as the "graphosphere" (Petrucci 1993: 46; Lurie 2011: 31). Petrucci's emphasis on a multiplicity of concurrent systems, their "extraordinary heterogeneity," is helpful, as is the sense that these systems operate with and against each other (Lurie 2011: 33). They function in a kind of unstable if productive dialogue (Bedos-Rezak and Hamburger 2016: 2). They have their own users, purposes, and practices, their own times of introduction, acceptance, and disappearance. In short, they have a history.

HIDDEN WRITING

In a sense, all writing is hidden until someone learns to read it (David Lurie, personal communication, 2016). This kind of record should be distinguished, however, from writing whose formal properties decelerate the preparation and reading of text. The intentional delays configured into an example of writing are what interest us here, what might be called "hypergraphs," a deliberate elaboration of signs that induces puzzlement, awe, and pleasure for the cognoscenti. Cryptographers sometimes speak of "steganography," data concealed within data, whether by embedded letters, invisible inks, microdots or some digital trick (Kahn 1996: xv). At some point, those data (excepting magical, purposefully unreadable texts) are intended for retrieval, even if only a small number of people may recognize them. The symbol of the fish used by some early Christians to advertise their faith provides a case in point: a schematic image "read" correctly in Greek yields an acronym "ἰχθύς" (Greek for "fish") that spells out a hidden message of salvation, "Jesus Christ,

Son of God, Savior," as in a reused epitaph from Rome that makes the syntax of the invocation explicit by adding the defining genitive "of the living" after the acronym "ἰχθύς" above a depiction of two fish flanking an anchor (Figure 0.1; Carletti 2014; cf. Cooley 2012: 232–34, fig. 2.27). The immediately accessible image – the fish – is the "carrier"; the hidden message – an invocation of Christ – is the "payload" (Kumar et al. 2011). The intent is to advertise meaning, but in ways that can only be engaged by those in the know.

As concealment, steganography may offer an imperfect parallel to hidden writing. Steganography is inimical to the uninvited; one must be versed in how to access its meaning. It tends also to employ the same signs or characters as does accessible text. Famously, in World War I, a press cable sent word of embargoes, law, and alarmist newspapers yet inserted, in the second letter of each word, "Pershing sails from N.Y. June 1" (Kahn 1996: 521): same code, same set of letters or numbers, but with a very different message. Hidden writing differs. As we define it, such notation operates more like code-switching or code-mixing, an alternation between modes of communication (Muysken 2000: 1). A picture may contain a concealed text, as with the celebrated caricatures of Al Hirschfeld, most of which contain, in inked hair or body outline, the name of Nina, his daughter (Hirschfeld 2015: xi). Or as in Maya full-figure glyphs, what appears to be a picture, at least at initial glance, is in fact an inscription.

A further subdivision of hidden writing depends on form or placement. An initial letter may be so elaborate as to be barely recognizable (Figure 0.2) – this is *hidden by form*. A pictorial involution has taken place, a notable increase in formal complexity. These exuberant shapes may occlude meaning or sound, at least for a time – think of the stunning illegibility of initials in the Book of Kells, especially the Chi-Rho christogram on folio 34r that records an abbreviated version of Christ's name (Trinity College Library, Dublin, IE TCD MS 58). Such involution does not only obscure, however. The flamboyance of Spencerian penmanship permitted a uniform legibility prior to the advent of the typewriter (Spencer 1875). There can be clarity in ornamentalism, for the Coca-Cola logo would not be so instantly recognizable without its Spencerian flourishes (Pendergrast 1993: 30). An extreme example, other than the full-figure Maya glyphs discussed in this volume (Houston), is "reed-writing" (*ashide*) from the late Heian period in Japan (Meech-Pekarik 1977). The "evocative shapes of the kana scripts began to suggest to Heian-period calligraphers representational forms – especially those of rocks, birds, grasses or reeds, and flowing water – and by the late tenth century *ashide* had become one of several recognized forms of script" (Meech-Pekarik 1977: 55).

Alternatively, writing could be *hidden by placement*, as with a tattoo on the inner lower lip, to be made visible by deliberate act, or removed from human view, as with the buried curse tablets and hidden prayer texts of the ancient

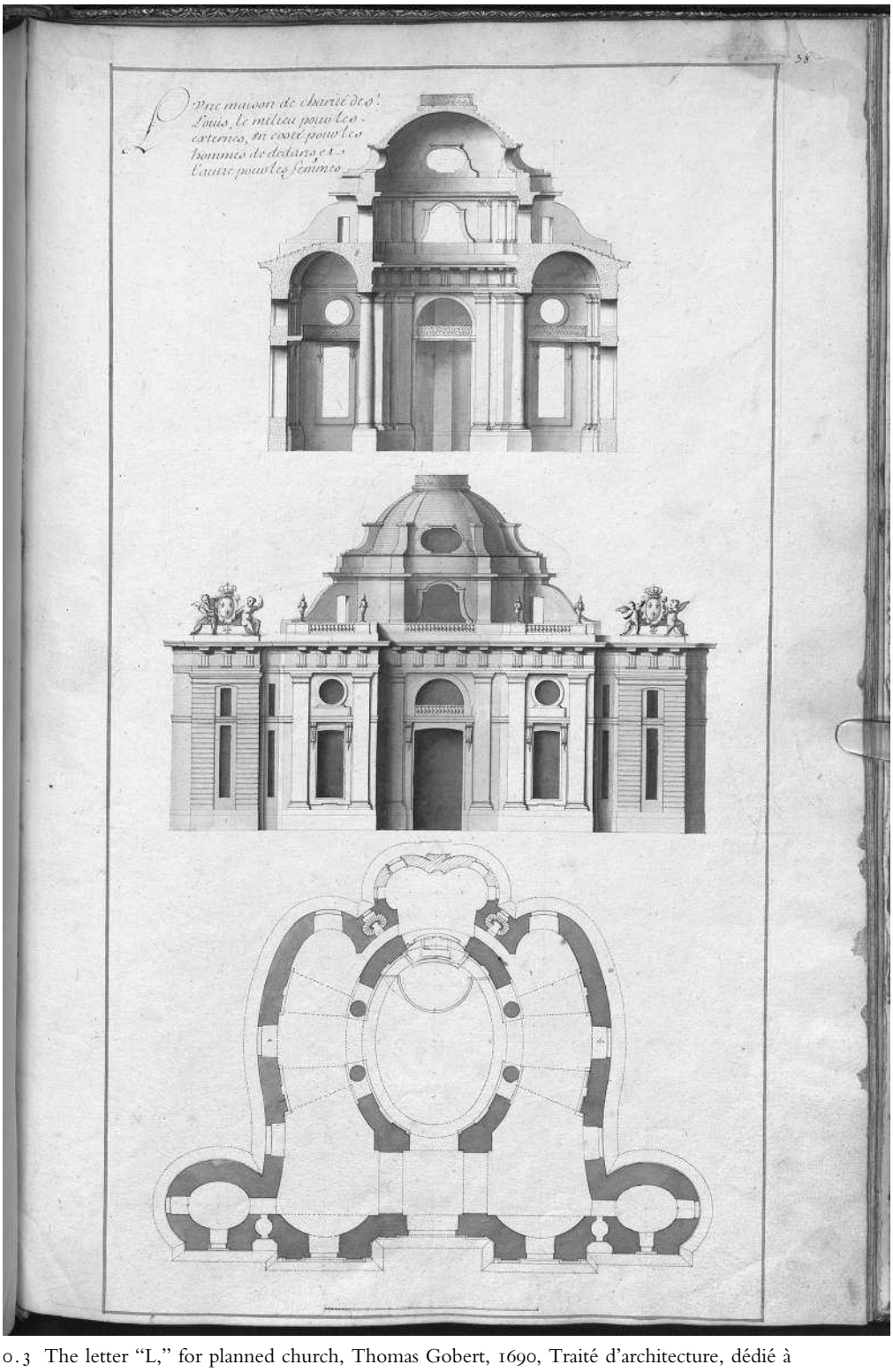
0.1 Licinia Amias slab, Rome, early third century CE, Terme 67646 (public domain, photo by John Bodel).

Mediterranean world (Bodel 2001: 19–24). These may function as their own agents, with a capacity to exert their own force as fetish objects. A devotional aim similarly underlies the prayer texts and sutras sealed within wooden carvings of the Kamakura period in Japan (Covaci and Moerman 2016: 122, 124; see the sculpture *Prince Shôtoku at Age Two*, c. 1292 CE [Shôtoku Taishi Nisaizô], Harvard Art Museum, 99.1979.1). Buddhist precepts lay behind an even more striking concealment of texts, the sutra burials of eleventh- and twelfth-century Japan (Moerman 2010). Interred at a time of presumed spiritual decline, crisis or degeneration, the "Final Dharma" (*mappō* in Japanese), these burials functioned more as "a time capsule than a tomb," to be exhumed along with their precious scripture after a period of 5.6 billion years (Moerman 2010: 72, 87).

Combining form and placement are texts *hidden by scale*. This category would include a Japanese scroll composed at first glance of brushwork but

0.2 Johann David Nessenthaler (German, Augsburg ca. 1717–before 1766 Augsburg) Purchase, Mrs. John D. Gordon Gift, in memory of William M. Ivins, Jr., 1963, Accession Number: 63.513.9 (CC0 1.0).

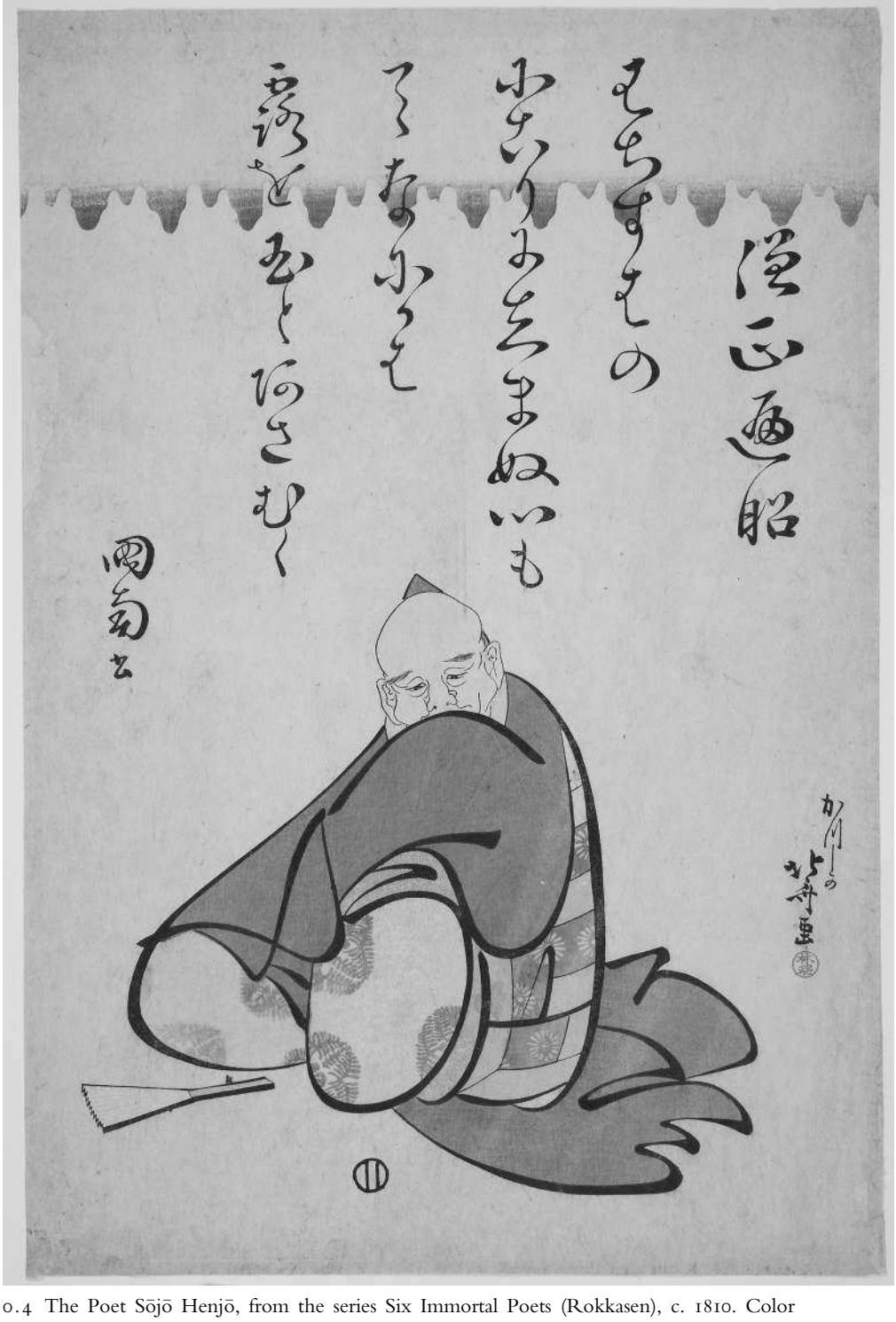
later seen to consist of quotations, in minute hand, from Buddhist Sutras (Mack 2007: 8). To make small is to set apart and to make claims about relations between things, depictions, and animating or presiding spirits (Angé and Pitrou 2016). Hebrew micrography, of which the earliest extant example dates to 929 CE, may have developed "to stabilize the biblical text and preclude changes," although doubtless this was done under the influence of the dominant Islamic book culture (Halperin 2013: 10). A similar emphasis on micrography for imperial or religious images flourishes within Christian Europe, such as in the productions of Johann Michael Püchler the Younger (active c. 1680–1702 CE, e.g., Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007.223.46, 2018.158; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1963.11.4). And with practical benefit: micro-writing (or -printing) allows a counterfeit bill to be distinguished from a real bill. The maker or writer is the person in control here, the one who determines the degree of accessibility or the process and pace by which readers retrieve sound and meaning. In one case, of fantasy buildings designed but never completed by Thomas Gobert (c. 1630–1708 CE), the architectural plans spelled out the name of "Louis le Grand," for twelve structures in total (Figure 0.3; Gobert 1690). The sycophantic text would only be visible to those viewing the plans, in this instance probably the entire motivation behind the graphic conceit.



0.3 The letter "L," for planned church, Thomas Gobert, 1690, Traité d'architecture, dédié à Louis XIV. Bayerische StaatsBibliothek, BSB Cod.icon. 188, f. 38 (used with permission).

Yet pragmatic impulse does not account for most hidden or slow writing. *Joie de vivre* has a counterpart: *joie d'écrire*, delight in writing. Hirschfeld has his fun, but there is also Hokusai's woodblock of one of the great poets of classical times, Sōjō Henjō (816–890 CE), whose name in hiragana syllables (and one Chinese kanji) defines the line of his garment (Figure 0.4; Thompson 2015: 86–87, pl. 25). If hidden or slow writing is about anything, it is about the zest of creating these small pauses and puzzles, of encouraging small aesthetic detours and inviting others to share in that pleasurable delay. The signs romp coyly, with wit.

Hidden writing charms and seduces us in several chapters here. *Wang Haicheng* (Chapter 1) is the most direct in accounting for writing inserted into deposits: for him, plausibly, these are sacrifices to spirits who have answered the queries of mortals. Not all exclude human readers. There are bronze vessels intended "for the owner's posterity to read and admire" or the "camouflaged" writing that teases the erudite, that makes them sweat hard to wring sense from an inscription. *Andréas Stauder* (Chapter 2) highlights the "visible otherness" of some forms of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. Endowed with an inherent "thickness," those signs contrast vividly, at times amusingly, with the "clear-script" (*Klarschrift*) of most inscriptions. *Stephen Houston* (Chapter 3) addresses the comparable effort involved in reading a Classic Maya "full-figure" text, which begins, as a system, in a fitful manner, evoking wild beasts and birds, and then taking other routes, some decorous, others not, in its dialogue with Maya imagery. A feature here, as with Islamic figuration, Egyptian too, is that the more hypergraphic the text, the simpler or more formulaic its message (see also Schick 2016: 176–77). In describing the cunning disguise or concealment of Arabic script, *Scott Redford* (Chapter 4) situates such texts in terms of talismanic meaning or supplication and artistic practice, but he also looks to the formal qualities that predispose the writing to stylized incorporation in decorative registers. *Benjamin Tilghman* (Chapter 5) takes the reader to the ultimate form of "hidden writing," its phantasm a pseudo-script that mimics writing yet recalls the intensity of its visual power (see also Houston 2018c). Here form dominates content, much as in the asemic writing practiced by artists such as Xu Bing or Cy Twombly, and establishes a visual slot (writing) that bears no direct meaning (e.g., Varnedoe 1994: 20, 22; Wu Hung 1994: 417). Still, as Tilghman notes, the reasons for undertaking asemic script vary, so that, in Xu Bing's case (and in his words), "[t]he sense of the sublime arises from the deliberate effort to reach a meaningless goal," and Twombly's "script" "preserv[es] spirit while drastically changing form" (Varnedoe 1994: 22). In Chapter 6 *Stephen Chrisomalis*, our preeminent scholar of numerical notation, looks at "chronograms," in which, as ludic or playful devices, dates are embedded in "a semi-cryptic hybrid text" that employs letters for numerical values. Chrisomalis observes that to be playful is not the same as being unserious or



0.4 The Poet Sōjō Henjō, from the series Six Immortal Poets (Rokkasen), c. 1810. Color woodblock print; oban 37.1 x 25.2 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3354 (CC0 1.0).

unskilled. Scribes may draw on the complexities of numerology and all the creative resources at their disposal.

EXPRESSIVE GRAPHS

It is not obvious that a volume on hidden writing and ancient mark-making finds relevance in Charles Dickens, but this one does: Dickens, commenting on the burning of the Houses of Parliament – a blaze that led to their replacement by Augustus Pugin's gothic pile – sputtered with rage long after the event in 1834 (Dickens 1937: 175–76; also Dantzig 2005: 23–24; Shenton 2012: 50–53, 255). A stack of wooden tallies, carved and notched from hazel, box, and willow, had only just become outmoded as a means of recording debts and their discharge (Figure 0.5). Amazingly, it took until 1783 for such marked and split pieces of wood to be voided by statute, and decades more for someone to decide that their physical removal could only be done by feeding them into a stove in the House of Lords (Shenton 2012: 52). For Dickens, the ensuing fire was matched in its folly only by the use, in the first place, of such "a savage mode" of accounting, "these preposterous sticks" as he put it (Dickens 1937: 175, 176). Sclerotic, mindless bureaucracy was his bull's eye, but the greater story is that an imperial power thought tallies useful long after the advent of other forms of written record-keeping (Baxter 1989: 53–60). As a system of accounting, tally marks go back to the Neolithic period, a time when the same methods of registration by notches and incisions could be used interchangeably for letters or numbers, as with the I, V, and X of the integrated Roman alphabetic and numerical systems (Ferraris 2013: 201–03), but their flexibility and utility ensured their continued use into the modern period. Napoleonic law, as part of a code passed in 1804, acknowledges the legality of tallies (Article 1333, Loi 1804-02-07; Wattel 1888: 240). The Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford has a vitrine with tallies used by bakers, masons, street-waterers, shepherds, and hop-pickers into the twentieth century, and an Irish court accepted tallies as late as 1928 (Pitt Rivers Museum, #1909.3.10; Welch 1928).

A tidy formulation is to see such marks in evolutionary terms, as "pre-steps" to writing. Discussion of them tends to come in the introductory chapters of books on writing, in evidence that pays little attention to time. Ethnographic examples from half a century ago huddle with paintings from Paleolithic caves (e.g., Gaur 1992: 18–32). To be sure, as Alexander Marshack has shown, tallies of various sorts exist plausibly in distant times, at the very beginning of modern humans (Marshack 1972). A physical act, a notching, carries with it an indelible account of what the notching might mean. Yet the grand narrative of human notation fixates on alternatives to writing as something in the past when, clearly, in certain places, they flourished alongside phonic writing – many tallies even have explanations inked on them (Baxter 1989: 52).