

Prologue

Experiencing *Wissenstransfer* in the First Episteme: Mesopotamia

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It can occasionally be useful to take a long view of knowledge transfer and the experiences of those who participated in it, by tracing its origins back to the earliest records in the long history of philology, for which abundant data can be found from Mesopotamia in the form of myriads of extant cuneiform tablets. These durable sources on clay and occasionally on stone, the earliest dating from the third millennium BCE and remaining legible until at least the third century CE, provide the first examples of many different writing genres, beginning with rudimentary accounts but soon progressing into narratives (myths, legends, chronicles, legal codes, incantations), as well as technical literature (medicine, divination, mathematics, astronomy, etc.). The same cuneiform script was used by students, scribes, scholars, and laymen for different, non-cognate languages such as Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, and Hurrian, which meant that knowledge transfer through translation was a key feature of this ancient episteme. There are some specific features of early writing that offer useful perspectives on ways in which the ability to record knowledge transformed society permanently and indelibly.

By approximately 3,000 BCE, mankind in the Fertile Crescent had discovered the art of record keeping, first with pictographic accounts but soon progressing into highly stylized cuneiform that soon became easily adaptable to expressing myths, incantations, and quasi-historical narratives. While on one hand we admire this emerging life-changing technology, it is comforting to fall back on the Eurocentric assurance that any writing system prior to the alphabet was too complex and cumbersome to become widely integrated into the lives of ordinary untrained individuals.

By the mid-second millennium BCE, a new and extremely concise writing scheme appeared on clay tablets, with some thirty modified cuneiform characters replacing the several hundred signs or characters used for Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite. Nevertheless, for the next two millennia, priests, bureaucrats, scribes, schoolboys, traders, merchants, and even kings kept using the original cuneiform script for letters,

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documents, and literature, and presumably could read these tablets as well, to some appropriate extent. As in China and elsewhere, the alphabet did not replace other scripts, despite its fewer characters. In fact, the overwhelming majority of cuneiform literature was non-alphabetic, and for good reasons. For native speakers of a language, cuneiform writing offered numerous advantages since, unlike the rather sparse alphabet, it offered the possibility of fully vocalized orthographies, with consonants, vowels, and even vowel length clearly delineated.¹ Second, the writing materials, consisting of wet clay and a reed stylus, were both durable and readily available, which facilitated the spread of literacy throughout urban populations.² Third, the durability of tablets meant that written records could survive over very long periods in the dry climate of Mesopotamia, so that first-millennium BCE schoolmasters could inherit and interpret older literature from the second or even third millennium BCE, because it was still available and legible. Fourth, the writing system itself helped scholars create a complex episteme and school curriculum, since it was based upon an inherent multilingualism. Soon after the invention of writing, speakers of Akkadian were already adapting the original Sumerian cuneiform syllabary to writing their Semitic language (Akkadian) and later using it for an Indo-European language (Hittite), so that engagement with translation and interpreting other languages developed to a high level.

One of the significant features of multilingualism was the built-in polyvalence of the cuneiform script, which very early on departed from single phonemic values for signs. Once the sign /sag/ for “head” in Sumerian could be read as /reš/ for “head” in Akkadian, the sign soon acquired both phonetic readings. Eventually, after Sumerian was no longer a spoken language, numerous Sumerian sign values were used in Akkadian as “logograms,” representing a concept rather than a sound, and were probably normalized or read as Akkadian.³ The same process adopted Akkadian words as logograms into Hittite and Aramaic words as logograms into Middle Persian. These complexities opened up numerous new avenues for hermeneutics, as we will see shortly, but at the same time created a new form of discipline-based genres not meant for laymen or a casual readership, which relied upon logograms in a similar way to that in which Latin was used in legal and medical jargon. Professional diviners, magical experts, physicians, priests, and astronomers, among others, developed their own peculiar writing styles, which no longer resembled the syllabic orthographies of an earlier era or of literary masterpieces such as the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

Translators of the extensive literature from Sumerian into Akkadian required tools and aids. Of these, the most important were lexical lists, which were extensive and virtually comprehensive lists of vocabulary and technical terminology, as well as grammatical paradigms and legal formulae. Together, these represented a system of lexicography known from

the earliest down to the latest phases of cuneiform writing.⁴ Many of these lists were bilingual, providing Akkadian translations of Sumerian words for material objects, gods, professions, flora and fauna, diseases, anatomy, and numerous other kinds of equations, not all of which can be easily categorized.

One of the key problems facing compilers of these extensive lists was determining the logical order and sequence of entries, since cuneiform had no ready means of taxonomy similar to the alphabet. Moreover, these same ancient compilers and lexicographers felt no particular need to compose memoranda for our benefit, with explanatory keys to their classification and ordering systems. For much of this material, we remain in the dark as to why seemingly unrelated data are listed in sequence. The other difficulty associated with these lists regards how and why they were constructed. The perennial question is posed whether compilers extracted vocabulary from texts and documents and collected it into glossaries, or created arbitrary lists of words that could be useful for literary reference, or some combination of both. It is clear that authors of highly learned Sumerian compositions closely associated with a school curriculum often employed rare or even obscure words, which they must have borrowed from lexical lists. These schoolboy dialogues lampooning academic life show an impressive mastery of the wide-ranging vocabularies, which the authors used to advantage in composing their texts.⁵

The use of tables is a crucial tool for experiencing knowledge transfer, and another easily recognizable characteristic of Sumerian and Akkadian lexical lists is their tabular layout, with Sumerian in the left-hand column and explanatory Akkadian on the right.⁶ The tabular format is often highlighted by both vertical and horizontal rulings, to mark off columns as well as dividing entries into discrete sections. Data presented in this kind of table layout remained one of the primary means of conveying information, allowing the user to scan visually large amounts of cuneiform data quickly. The tabular format was not limited to lexical lists and glossaries; it was also one of the characteristic formats for hemerologies and astronomical tables, and generally any data set that provided information in a condensed form, with either numbers or short entries. Tables were also, however, widely used by scholar-commentators, who entered a word in the left-hand column and explained it by a word in the right-hand column, a format that resembled the lexical texts in many respects.⁷

More than nine hundred commentary tablets have been found in Mesopotamian archives, often esoteric and difficult to understand, particularly since it is not always possible to identify the proof-text being commented upon.⁸ Nevertheless, the patterns of hermeneutics are well elaborated, based on studies of technical hermeneutical terminology and on methods of hermeneutics developed by Babylonian scribe-scholars.⁹ At the heart of this system of hermeneutics is Sumerian-Akkadian

bilingualism, which allowed for word-play, puns, and multiple meanings derived from the polyvalent cuneiform writing.

What is most remarkable about this system, apart from its complexity, is that the written record of commentaries attributes hermeneutics to oral teachings. Colophons of commentary texts regularly state that the contents of the tablet are *ša pî ummâni*, “from the mouth of the expert” (i.e., professor), or alternatively simply *šut pî*, “oral explanation.”¹⁰ According to Frahm, the *ummânu*—master-scholar—is usually anonymous,¹¹ but this is a misunderstanding of school culture. Like other titles, such as “Pope,” it is hardly necessary to mention this person by name, since every student would know immediately who “The Prof” was. The commentary tablets themselves are mostly meant for internal school consumption, possibly even representing the notes taken in lectures by students. More generally, it is a hallmark of such commentary texts to be attributed to oral teachings from a master-scholar.

It is not only commentaries that are attributed to the *pî ummâni*, or oral tradition. Many other texts which could be considered esoteric, in fields such as medicine or astrology, are also noted as such in colophons, with the added injunction that the contents are not to be shown to the uninitiated or those not knowledgeable (*la mūdû*). This emphasis on the importance of orality is not exclusively Babylonian—Plato’s Phaedrus comments on the same topic, insisting that teachings in written form are unreliable, since they diminish the memory and one cannot argue with the written word. Socrates adds:

You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.¹²

Mistrust of written teachings indicates preference for oral ones. This is the same tendency we find in Late Antiquity in rabbinic Jewish tradition, which recognizes two separate compendia, the Written Law (the Torah) and the Oral Law (the Talmud). The irony of this scheme, however, is that the Oral Law was also committed to writing in separate phases, while still maintaining its association with orality. The Talmud is functionally a commentary on biblical law, although in fact it is an encyclopedia of collected opinion on all social and religious topics, formulated as doxologies or quotations from numerous scholars and rabbis from Palestine and Babylonia. The orality of the text is almost entirely artificial, since the seventh-century CE redactors purposely edited quotations and statements as if they derived from direct discourse between two or more scholars at the same time, when

in reality the cited speakers often never met. Nevertheless, the prestige and authority of the text rested on its orality, its being composed of opinions and direct speech attributed to noted scholars over the expanse of several centuries, and these statements represented collective wisdom of the rabbinic schools.

All of these aspects of Mesopotamian scribal culture, stemming from its writing system, inherent multilingualism, interest in lexicography and hermeneutics, and preference for orality, remained at the core of curricula and of philology long after Mesopotamian culture itself was forgotten. It is good to recollect that this first episteme was in existence continuously for more than three millennia, outliving successive cultures in Western Asia and Europe, and hence merits our retrospective attention and scrutiny.

Notes

- 1 The original Semitic alphabet only preserved vowel sounds under exceptional circumstances.
- 2 The usual assumption that fewer characters in the alphabet encouraged the spread of literacy is likely to be incorrect or at least exaggerated. The original alphabet was not easily adaptable to writing a foreign language unfamiliar to the reader, since the system of writing only approximates language. Moreover, writing materials (such as leather or parchment) were expensive and hence not always available to the general population, and this would impede literacy.
- 3 Sumerian continued to be read and translated in Akkadian schools after its demise as a spoken language, but the system of Sumerian “logograms” used within Akkadian texts (e.g., É instead of *bi-tu* for “house”) often developed special meanings of their own, no longer corresponding to the original Sumerian meanings of the signs.
- 4 The fullest discussion of the lexical system can be found in Veldhuis, *History*.
- 5 For an example of a school composition relying heavily upon lexical texts, see Johnson and Geller, *Class Reunion*, 11.
- 6 This is a general scheme, with variations such as in Ugarit, c. 1300 BCE, from which one lexical list was found in four languages: Sumerian, Akkadian, Hurrian, and Ugaritic. Veldhuis, *History of the Cuneiform Lexical Tradition*, 232.
- 7 One lexical text in particular, called *Malku-šarru*, was a list of synonyms, a precursor of the modern thesaurus. The difference between this “lexical” text and a commentary is that a commentary drew its words to be explained from some other primary source, while the lexical list is simply a lengthy list of synonyms. See Hruša, *Die akkadische Synonymenliste*.
- 8 Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, is the best (and only) up-to-date survey of Mesopotamian commentaries.
- 9 See Gabbay, *Exegetical Terminology*, for a useful overview of the technical terminology of commentaries, which explains much of the logic of hermeneutics.
- 10 Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 43–44, 55–56.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 12 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Fowler, 562–67.

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