Texts, Tablets, and Teaching

Scribal Education in Nippur and Ur

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Besides the justly famous treasures of the so-called Royal Cemetery, the site of Ur also yielded up to its excavators a treasure with less immediate aesthetic appeal, but arguably of even greater importance: thousands of clay tablets and stone objects inscribed with cuneiform writing. These inscriptions bear witness to the lives and thoughts of the inhabitants of Ur over a span of more than two thousand years.

Many of the texts are administrative in character, detailing the incoming and outgoing accounts of institutions such as temples. Another long-lived class of text is that of royal inscriptions, which range in complexity from very short, dedicatory passages to extended accounts of a king's building activities and military campaigns. The shorter texts are often found on a wide variety of objects in and around the buildings whose construction they commemorate: on bricks, statuettes of the king bearing a workbasket, prototypical bricks modeled in stone, and door-sockets, among others. The longer texts were originally inscribed on stone monuments, but were also duplicated entirely or in part on clay tablets for various reasons. Some may have been drafts made for the stonecutter, others are clearly first-generation copies made directly from the monuments.

LEXICAL AND LITERARY TEXTS AND THEIR PURPOSE

The principal remaining group of tablets from Ur comprises the lexical and literary finds. They are invaluable both in their own right and when combined with and compared to the similar but much more numerous finds from the city of Nippur, also excavated by the University of Pennsylvania Museum. *Lexical texts* are lists of words and phrases, often arranged thematically—for example, lists of trees and wooden objects—but also arranged by the signs used to write the words, and sometimes by the semantic categories of synonymy or antonymy. Many of these texts were designed to introduce students to Sumerian writing and language.

Literary texts encompass, among other things, myths about gods and their (mis)adventures, hymns of praise to kings, gods, and temples, and narratives of Gilgamesh and other early heroes of Sumer (Michalowski 1995). The importance of the literary texts from Ur was well described two decades ago in the pages of this very journal by the grandfather of Sumerology, Samuel Noah Kramer (1977). Some compositions well known from Nippur can be more fully reconstructed by reference to the materials from Ur, although one must be wary because distinct texts may begin similarly, or share a key refrain, while otherwise being quite different. Other texts are attested only at Ur.

The tablets of Ur answer many questions while raising numerous others concerning the history, society, and culture of ancient Mesopotamia. On a fundamental level, though, the two questions we ask about all texts are, Who wrote this? and Why? When one reads the administrative archives of a temple or merchant it is easy to give answers, at least on a superficial level: these tablets were written by bureaucrats, scribes, and businessmen as accounts of their transactions. For royal inscriptions the answer is not much more complicated: kings wanted to record their deeds for the gods and/or posterity.

Answering the same questions when it comes to literary and lexical texts is not as straightforward, however, and one must turn to Nippur, the source of the largest and most important finds of Sumerian literature, in search of understanding. (The original epigrapher of the late 19th century Nippur excavations, Hermann Hilprecht, was unequivocal in *his* answers to these questions, and not entirely wrong. Writing near the turn of the century, Hilprecht said of his finds on "Tablet Hill" at Nippur that "there can be no doubt that the whole area occupied by the large triangular mound was included in the temple library and school of the city" [1903: 520].) That many, perhaps all, of the extant early literary and lexical texts are associated with scribal education is now widely agreed and has been the subject of a long series of scholarly and popular presentations. The present synthetic sketch owes much to its forerunners, and adds a visual dimension to them in the form of a photo-essay on the texts and tablet types which the ancient scribes wrote during their schooling.

"many, perhaps all, of the extant early literary and lexical texts are associated with scribal education"

THE CUNEIFORM CURRICULUM

Hilprecht's original description of the school texts from Nippur still stands, with minor corrections:

> The character of the northeast wing as a combined library and school was determined immediately after an examination of the contents of the unearthed tablets and fragments. There is a large number of rudely fashioned specimens inscribed in such a naïve and clumsy manner with old-Babylonian characters, that it seems impossible to regard them as anything else but the first awkward attempts at writing by unskilled hands,—so-called school exercises. Those who attended a class evidently had to bring their writing material with them, receiving instruction not only in inscribing and reading cuneiform tablets, but also in shaping them properly, for not a few of the round and rectangular tablets were uninscribed. (1903:524–25)

Hilprecht's sketch of the curriculum (1903: 525ff.) has been significantly fleshed out and improved upon, most recently and importantly by Niek Veldhuis, who has now demonstrated the precise sequence in which syllable, name, and word lists were introduced (1997:41–63).

The earliest exercises consisted in practicing the mechanics of wedge and sign formation. The simplest texts consist only of vertical (or horizontal) wedges (Fig. 1), or only of angled (corner) wedges (Fig. 2). These are succeeded by exercises which combine vertical, horizontal, and angled wedges (Fig. 3, and see Fig. 6), or a full-height vertical wedge followed by two half-height verticals placed one above the other (Fig. 4). Although these sequences do indeed make signs—the former reads BAD and the latter A—the importance of this exercise lies primarily in the combination of wedges, as shown by a variant exercise on the reverse of the tablet in Figure 4. In this exercise superposed vertical wedges are repeated over and over, first preceded by a vertical, then by a horizontal, then by an angled wedge (Fig. 5). Though the first of these combinations makes the sign A, as in the preceding exercise, the other combinations do not create known signs. The point was to practice sign-making.

Repetition is a key element of the next level of exercise, known today as Syllable Alphabet B, which consisted of writing common signs without regard to their meaning, or the meaning of their combinations (Fig. 6). These exercises focus on the correct execution of a sign. After Syllable Alphabet B, the students came to grips with a different kind of syllabically oriented exercise, called today after its first line, "Tu-ta-ti" (Fig. 7), that emphasized pronunciation. Tu-ta-ti covered about 80 syllables, and was followed by the lists of personal names and thematically organized lists of words

FIG. 1
Nippur. UPM CBS 6043, H. 9.8 cm. Neg. S4-133371A

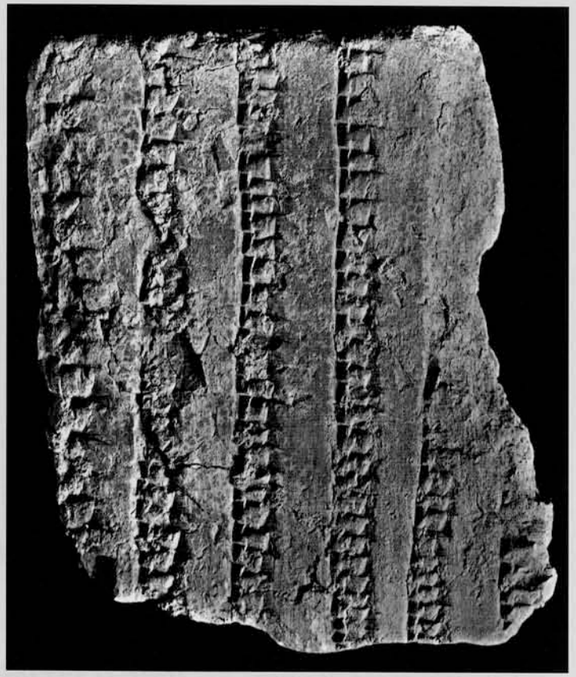

FIG. 3.
Nippur, Tablet Hill. UPM CBS 6065, H. 14.4 cm. Neg. G8-6747

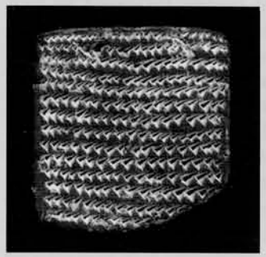

FIG. 2
Nippur. UPM 29-15-846, H. 5.1 cm

FIG. 4.
Nippur. UPM CBS 10517 obv., H. 15.5 cm. Neg. G8-6709

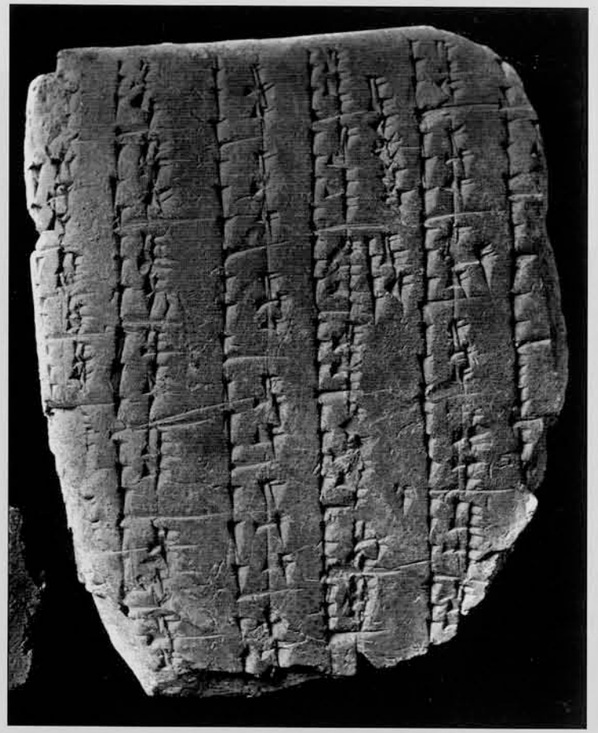

FIG. 5.
Nippur. UPM CBS 10517 rev. Neg. G8-6771

FIG. 6A, B.
Nippur. UPM N5147 obv. and rev., H. 5.2 cm

The first six figures give examples of the sequence of exercises carried out by trainee scribes as they first encountered the cuneiform writing system. The most elementary technical component of writing was to press the stylus, a reed trimmed to have a square or triangular end, into the clay to leave a triangular impression with a deeply incised head and a shallower tail. The distinctive shape of the impressions gave rise to the term "cuneiform," from Latin *cuneus*, triangle. Thus, in Figure 1 the scribe executed repeated vertical wedges (𒁹) and in Figure 2 repeated corner wedges (𒌋).

Combinations of wedges came next, as illustrated in Figure 3, which can be viewed as a sequence of vertical + horizontal + corner impressions (𒁹𒌝𒌋), and Figure 4, which is a sequence of vertical + vertical-over-vertical impressions (𒌨). Both of these texts, as well as several other figures, illustrate the common practice in lexical texts of beginning every line with a vertical wedge (𒁹), something like the modern practice of introducing every item in a list with a bullet (•).

However, one can also view Figure 3 as a sequence of 𒁹𒌝𒌋 impressions, in which the latter wedges actually form the sign BAD (𒀝). Similarly, the obverse of Figure 4 represents a combination of impressions that also has meaning as a sign, i.e., A (𒀀). But Figure 5, the reverse of the tablet in Figure 4, contains wedge-combinations of which only the first (𒀀) has meaning as a sign; the other elements are 𒌝𒁹 and 𒄿. This tablet is thus transitional between purely technical exercises and those which write signs. Similarly, Figure 6 illustrates a small Type II tablet, in which the reverse (probably the previously known and practiced part) contains the same exercise as Figure 3, while the obverse gives the teacher's exemplar of part of Syllable Alphabet B, consisting of repetitions of signs in which the juxtaposition is meaningless (A A; A A A; A KU; A KU KU; ME ME; ME A; ME ME A =𒀀𒀀; 𒀀𒀀𒀀; 𒀀𒆤; 𒀀𒆤𒆤; 𒁹𒁹; 𒁹𒀀; 𒁹𒁹𒀀).

FIG. 7. AN EXAMPLE OF THE SYLLABICALLY STRUCTURED LIST "TU-TA-TI." The structure gives each syllable on its own line, then the group is repeated on a line together, e.g., TU; TA; TI; TU TA TI; NU; NA; NI; NU NA NI; BU; BA; BI; BU BA BI.
Nippur. UPM CBS 14143, H. 17 cm

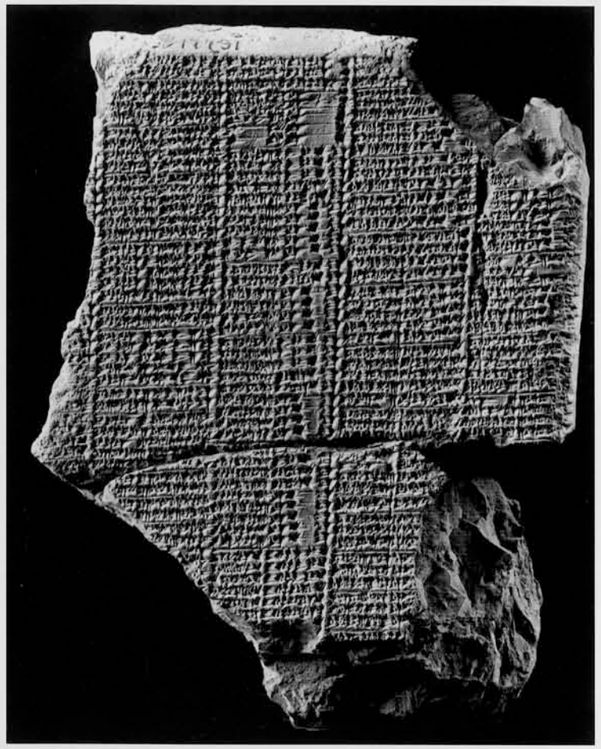

FIG. 8. AN EXQUISITE EXAMPLE OF THE SCRIBAL ART—the great list of grammatical forms.
Nippur, Mound IV. UPM CBS 19791, H. ca. 16 cm. Neg. S8-22052

(beginning with names of trees and wooden items). Other advanced lists systematized students' knowledge of the intricacies of Sumerian writing, in which a single sign may be used to write an entire semantic set of words; for example, one sign is used for *ka* ("mouth"), *inim* ("word"), *dug* ("to speak"), *gu* ("voice"), as well as for *zu* ("tooth") and *kiri* ("nose") (these elements of the curriculum are well described in Civil 1995). Occasionally, advanced students wrote entire lexical series on four- or six-sided prisms, or on large tablets which may be beautifully executed, as in the great list of grammatical forms (Fig. 8).

TABLET TYPES

One of the keys to understanding the general sequence of items in the curriculum is the physical typology of the tablets on which exercises are inscribed. The commonest form of elementary exercise tablet at Nippur has two columns on the obverse, the left normally being the teacher's exemplary passage, the right being a scratch pad on which students repeatedly write and then erase

FIG. 9. ONE OF THE BEST PRESERVED TYPE II TABLETS KNOWN. Note the teacher's column on the left giving an extract from the list of woods, and the scratch pad on the right on which a variety of exercises has obviously been executed. The less well preserved reverse contains a list of personal names.
Nippur. UPM CBS 14156 obv., H. 16.4 cm

the example text (Fig. 9). On the reverse there is usually a lengthier extract of a different list which a student has written out. The overwhelming majority of these tablets contain lexical lists and name lists; some have multiplication tables; some have proverbs; and a very few have literary texts drawn from a very restricted group. Specialists call these Type II texts, following a typology established by Miguel Civil (see Civil 1995:2038 for the most recent and convenient presentation). The scratch-pad side of the obverse is often worn thin with repeated erasing, is sometimes broken off and sometimes apparently cut off, or at least carefully cleaned, so that the teacher could retain his master exemplar.

Although Type II tablets predominate in Nippur, they are less common at other sites and are almost unknown at Ur. It is difficult to gauge the significance of this fact, as these texts were clearly transient and recyclable, so that in a schoolhouse closed down in good order there may be no exercise tablets at all. The preservation of the Nippur exercise texts may be due to the sudden and violent demise of the city in 1722 BC (Civil 1979:7–8). It is perfectly conceivable that a combination

FIG. 10A, B. TWO EXAMPLES OF THE TYPE OF TABLET CALLED "LENTILS." These contain extracts from the beginner's literary text, Lipit-Eshtar Hymn B.
Nippur. (a) UPM CBS 6051, H. 7.2 cm; (b) CBS 7866, H. 8 cm

of historical factors, the recyclability of the text type, and archaeological accident severely skews our data on the distribution of Type II tablets, and that they were used at Ur just as at Nippur.

Another common type of tablet which was apparently used early in the process of scribal training is the small round tablet, usually called either a "lentil" or a "bun," on which the teacher writes a line and the student repeats it (Fig. 10).

A SUMERIAN *CAT IN THE HAT*?

From the lexical texts the students graduated to literary texts. This does not imply that they no longer studied lexical texts, rather that literary texts were added to the course of instruction. One composition in particular seems to have been featured at this transitional phase in the learning process. This is a hymn to the fifth king of the Isin I dynasty, Lipit-Eshtar (1934–1924 BC), called today Lipit-Eshtar Hymn B or "Lipit-Ishtar, King of Justice, Wisdom and Learning" (Vanstiphout 1978). Besides being one of the very few literary texts that occur on the Type II exercise tablets, this hymn also occurs on the single-column tablet type that is characteristic of school literature (see below), suggesting its transitional status. (The only specimens of this hymn from Ur are on lentils, suggesting that it played a role in basic education in that city also.)

Besides the clues offered by the types of tablets on which the hymn is found, the grammatical simplicity of the text has been pointed out by Herman Vanstiphout (1979), who convincingly argues that this was one of the very first literary texts to which students were introduced in Old Babylonian Nippur. It is interesting to note that those examples which were intended to contain the whole of the sixty-line composition deployed it over six ten-line columns. This arrangement gave the text the sprawling disposition that is typical of Type II tablets, with their relatively large, often inexperienced handwriting.

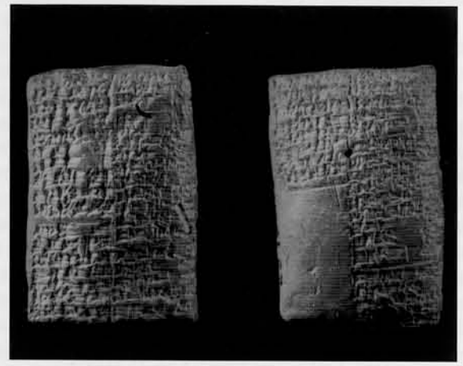

FIG. 11. THE NIPPUR CATALOGUE OF LITERARY COMPOSITIONS.
Nippur. UPM 29-15-155, H. 6.1 cm. Neg. S8-6812

FIG. 12A, B. A TYPICAL ONE-COLUMN DAILY EXERCISE TABLET, or *imgida* ("long tablet"), with a letter from a king. Note the doodle of a human figure at the end of the text, which is rare though not unique.
Nippur. UPM CBS 7772 obv. and rev., H. 9.2 cm

GRADUATING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

The range of literary texts studied in the school curriculum was broad: myths; narratives of kings from a heroic age; praises of kings; lamentations over the destruction of cities; hymns to gods and temples; disputations between animals, seasons, and tools (for example, dialogues between ewe and grain, summer and winter, hoe and plow); proverbs; and a group of humorous texts about life in the "Edubba," or school. There is evidence of attempts at pedagogical systematization of this wealth of literature, in the form of several catalogues giving the first lines of texts. Two other catalogues (Fig. 11) seem to be comprehensive listings of the corpus of Sumerian literature; they not only show extensive similarities despite probably being from different sites, but also appear to show evidence of a pedagogical ordering of the compositions, at the very least at the beginning of the catalogues (Civil 1975:145, n. 36).

Most of these compositions are inscribed on the single-column exercise tablets, which come in a variety of sizes. They may have as few as 10 to 15 lines on a side, and contain either short texts or extracts from larger texts (Fig. 12); or they may have up to 60 lines on a side and contain texts and extracts up to 120 lines in length. The smaller specimens are hard to group, and it has so far proved impossible to demonstrate conclusively that a given sequence of extracts actually represents a longer composition inscribed on a series of separate tablets. This suggests that the writing of isolated extracts of longer texts was part of the training process. In the case of the larger specimens one can identify several groups of five or six tablets probably written by the same scribe, on the criteria of size, shape, and handwriting (Tinney 1995:15–16).

Longer texts are generally written on tablets which have two or three columns per side. Such texts may split a long composition over two or more tablets,

A Day in the Sumerian School

Schoolboy, what did you do in the tablet-house?
I read my tablet aloud, I ate my lunch,
I made a tablet, and finished my writing exercise.
After I was let out of school, I would go home and my father was sitting there.
I recited my daily exercises for him,
Read my tablet aloud; my father was pleased.
Based on Kramer 1949: lines 1-11

I went in and sat down, and my teacher read my tablet. He said "There's something missing!"
And he caned me.
One of the people in charge said "Why did you open your mouth without my permission?"
And he caned me.
The one in charge of rules said "Why did you get up without my permission?"
And he caned me.
The gatekeeper said "Why are you going out without my permission?"
And he caned me.
The keeper of the beer jug said "Why did you get some without my permission?"
And he caned me.
The Sumerian teacher said "Why did you speak Akkadian?"
And he caned me.
My teacher said "Your hand(writing) is no good!"
And he caned me.
Based on Kramer 1949: lines 23-41

After this sorry turn of events the young scribe is hopeless, and asks his father to invite the teacher to dinner. Shamelessly, they seat the teacher in the best place, wash him, anoint him with fine oils, give him fine date-wine, a good meal, and some new clothes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the teacher then blesses the student and promises to educate him to the very highest levels of achievement of the scribal craft.

and one can point to examples in which several related compositions may be represented by sets of two-column texts written by the same scribe. Some of the biggest and most beautiful literary texts squeeze even the longest compositions onto a single, minutely written tablet. The extent to which these groupings of tablets represent the works of individuals, perhaps even inchoate libraries, is a matter which requires further research. It should be pointed out, however, that these tablets do not represent superior transcriptions of the literary works (i.e., with the fewest number of errors). Indeed, it has been remarked that apart from the master's column of Type II tablets, there are no texts that are of such good quality that they should be viewed as teachers' copies (Civil 1979:7). Writing in school was an exercise for students, not a medium for the preservation of Sumerian literature for posterity.

"the archaeological data suggest that much schooling in Old Babylonian times . . . took place in private houses."

By now the word "school" has been mentioned several times, and it is worth briefly considering the evidence for where learning took place and with what aim.

GOING TO SCHOOL IN OLD BABYLONIAN TIMES

The humorous native Babylonian presentation of the school (see box) showcases an institution with hierarchical structure, harsh discipline, and communal focus as described in Åke Sjöberg's classic portrait (1975). Though few schoolrooms have been identified, the archaeological data suggest that much schooling in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000–1500 BC) took place in private houses. Thus, one likely example is in the house of Ur-Utu, the high lamentation priest of Tell ed-Der. In one room the excavators found a large box constructed of baked bricks and recessed into the floor; the box was filled with fragments of exercise tablets (Gasche 1989:19, and pl. 9). Similarly, a large jar found at Susa contained both raw clay and exercise tablets (Ghirshman 1965). Both the box and the jar were presumably used to store the raw materials used for making practice tablets, and the fragmentary exercises were almost certainly in the process of being recycled. This in turn implies that our sample of exercise tablets has survived due entirely to luck and accident.

The finds of tablets from the post-war excavations at Nippur likewise come principally from private houses. Indeed, though Hilprecht had been convinced his excavations were uncovering temple architecture, the plan of his finds closely resembles that of private houses (Hilprecht 1903:523).

And so we return to Ur, where the Sumerian literary texts were also found in a residential quarter of the city (Charpin 1986). These texts are predominantly on lentils and the single-column exercise tablets, suggesting that at Ur, as at Nippur, scribal education was being carried out in private houses. In fact, the finds in one house at Ur, which Woolley named "No. 7 Quiet Street," were so copious that it must have functioned as a school for scribal education (Charpin 1986:420–48). Over two thousand texts came from this building, including administrative documents and lexical, mathematical, and literary texts; those that can be dated come from the first half of the 18th century BC. Internal evidence from certain of these texts also seems to cast light on the nature of schooling. Two tablets from the house preserve the same composition (Gadd and Kramer 1963: nos. 76 and 77) and are identical to each other as far as they are preserved, except in their spelling. For example, the Sumerian word for "bird," *mushen*, is spelled in one text as MU-SHI-NA and in the other MU-SHE-NA. It is likely, if unprovable, that these represent a pair of texts taken as dictation by two students in the same class.

THE AIMS AND BENEFITS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

We have seen, then, that on one level most, perhaps all, of the literary and lexical texts written at Ur and Nippur were copied out by students learning the Sumerian language and traditions. Recent research, however, suggests other motivations for the demanding curriculum followed by the schoolchildren (Veldhuis 1997:82–83; Robson 1995). For while there was an indisputable practical value to being able to write, to become a scribe or high-ranking bureaucrat and have a good life, the complexity and scope of the curriculum surely went beyond the bare necessities. Perhaps not all scribes, not all of those who wrote the daily administrative accounts, had educations that advanced to the higher levels, but what of those who did? The answer seems to lie precisely in the complexity of education and the intrinsic value of tradition in Mesopotamian society. For on one level, learning obscure terminology and developing advanced mathematical skills was a matter of developing knowledge for knowledge's sake. On another level, partaking

of the knowledge of the bureaucratic classes presumably made one an insider, providing a privileged opportunity to hold high administrative posts and perhaps strengthening the dynastic hold over such posts.

This realization brings with it an interesting corollary. As trainees in a society in which the administration owed its allegiances to both its class and its king, young scribes were indoctrinated in the course of being educated (Michalowski 1987). Certain royal inscriptions, and derived texts, seem to have entered the scribal curriculum and become part of the stock of materials learned and written out by the trainees. That the scribes copied royal inscriptions as part of their education, as well as literary texts about successful and unsuccessful kings, is particularly significant here. Texts about kingship not only secure and enhance the image of the king, but may also tell political-moral tales about the viability of certain types of king and kingship, thus bringing the entire debate about the place of kings in society into a state of tension, and strengthening the position of the bureaucracy. Viewed in this light, the development of a bureaucratic esprit de corps emerges as one of the principal functions of ancient Mesopotamian scribal education and the texts that formed one of its key components.

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