Texts, Tablets, and Teaching

Scrabal Education in Nippur and Ur

Steve Tinney

Besides the pasty 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 and in and around the building whose construction they commemorate: on bricks, stamnetes of the king bearing a workbasket, prototypical bricks modeled in stone, and doorknobs, 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 stonemason, 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 symmetricity or antonymy. Many of these texts were designed to introduce students to Sumerian writing and language.

Lexical 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 (Mitchell 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 business owners 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 find 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.

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 unseen tablets and inscriptions. There is a large number of rudely fashioned specimens inscribed in such a naive 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. (1903:524-525)

Hilprecht’s sketch of the curriculum (1903: 525f.) has been significantly fleshed out and improved upon, most recently and importantly by Nick 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 writing, with the simplest texts consisting 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 sense—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 exercises, 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-tu” (Fig. 7), that emphasized pronunciation. Tu-ta-tu covered about 80 syllables, and was followed by the lists of personal names and thematically organized lists of words.
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 (7) and in Figure 2 repeated corner wedges (8).

Combinations of wedges came next, as illustrated in Figure 3, which can be viewed as a sequence of vertical + horizontal + corner impressions (7—4), and Figure 4, which is a sequence of vertical + vertical-over-vertical impressions (7). 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 (7), 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 7—7 impressions, in which the latter wedges actually form the sign BAD (7•). Similarly, the obverse of Figure 4 represents a combination of impressions that also has meaning as a sign, i.e., A (7). But Figure 5, the reverse of the tablet in Figure 4, contains wedge-combinations of which only the first (7) has meaning as a sign; the other elements are 7—4 and 7. 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 Syllabic Alphabet B, consisting of repetitions of signs in which the juxtaposition is meaningless (A A A A A A KU ME ME ME ME -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7• -7•).
One of the best preserved types of tablet is the "Uruk" tablets, which are typically rectangular and have a grid-like structure. These tablets are often used for record-keeping and can be divided into several categories based on their content and layout. The most common type is the "Uruk" tablet, which is characterized by its grid-like structure and is often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes.

The tablets are made of clay and are typically written on with a stylus. The text is usually arranged in a grid-like format, with each column containing a single word or phrase. The tablets are often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes, and they can provide valuable insights into the economy and society of ancient Mesopotamia.

The tablets are typically divided into several categories based on their content and layout. The most common type is the "Uruk" tablet, which is characterized by its grid-like structure and is often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes. Other types of tablets include the " Phyto" tablets, which are typically written in cuneiform script and are often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes.

The tablets are typically written in cuneiform script and are often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes. The tablets are typically made of clay and are written on with a stylus.

The tablets are typically written in cuneiform script and are often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes. The tablets are typically made of clay and are written on with a stylus.

The tablets are typically written in cuneiform script and are often used for record-keeping and administrative purposes. The tablets are typically made of clay and are written on with a stylus.
of historical factors, the recyclability of the text type, and archaeological accident severely skewed 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 “linear” or a “lens,” 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 Third Dynasty, Lipit-Ishtar (1934–1824 BC), called today Lipit-Ishtar 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 lenses, suggesting that it played a role in basic education in that city also.)

Besides the chiasms 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 these 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.
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 canceled me.
One of the people in charge said, “Why did you open your mouth without my permission?”
And he canceled me.
The one in charge of rules said, “Why did you get up without my permission?”
And he canceled me.
The gatekeeper said, “Why are you going out without my permission?”
And he canceled me.
The keepers of the beer jug said, “Why did you get some without my permission?”
And he canceled me.
The Sumerian teacher said, “Why did you speak Akkad?!”
And he canceled me.
My teacher said, “Your hand (writing) is no good!”
And he canceled 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 scribe craft.

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

The humorous native Babylonian presentation of the school (see box) showcases an institution with hierarchical structure, harsh discipline, and communal focus as described in Ake Śijberg’s classic portrait (1973). 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-Uru, the high lamentation priest of Ell ed-De. 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 (Gaenszler 1989:19, and pl. 9). Similarly, a large jar found at Nuzi 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 tablets. Perhaps among the tablets were 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.

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 1901:123).

And so we return to Ur, where the Sumerian literary texts were also found in a residential quarter of the city (Chapin 1986). These texts are predominantly on letter texts 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 Veselovsky named “No. 7 Quiet Street,” were so copious that it must have functioned as a school for scribal education (Chapin 1986:420–428). 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 “bard,” murnan, is spelled in one text as MURNA and in the other MUNNA. 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 1997:42-43; 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 of copying tablets. Not all of those who wrote the daily administrative accounts, had education 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, 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Charpin, Dominique

Civil, Miguel

Gadd, C.J., and Samuel Noah Kramer

Gasche, Hermann

Ghirshman, Roman

Hilprecht, Hermann V.

Kramer, Samuel Noah

Michalowski, Piotr

Robson, E.

Sjöberg, Åke W.

Tinney, Stephen J.

Vanstiphout, Herman

Veldhuis, Nick