

Sub-project C11

Private Archives as a Source for Literacy in the Old Assyrian Society

Prof. Dr. Cécile Michel

Wiebke Beyer, M.A.

Sources

Cuneiform script written on fresh clay has been the main script used for more than three millennia (ca. 3400 BCE – 90 CE) in a very large area of the Near East. Originally written in Sumerian, the majority of cuneiform tablets were subsequently written in the Akkadian language, subdivided into two dialects, Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian, from the 2nd millennium on. Beside official and private archives, thousands of school tablets have been unearthed. Those from Nippur, in Southern Babylonia, have enabled scholars to reconstruct the curriculum of scribal education, which looked quite academic. However, very recent studies have highlighted a diversity of teaching practices linked to different milieus. Among the 22,000 cuneiform tablets (19th century BCE) found in the houses of the Assyrian merchants in the lower town of Kaneš (Central Anatolia), some school texts bear witness to on-the-job training. These tablets represent the first large group of cuneiform private archives and the first evidence of a complex commercial system based on international exchanges.



Old Assyrian tablets from the archive excavated in 1993 at Kültepe, ancient Kaneš. Photo: Cécile Michel © Kültepe archaeological mission.

Method and Goals

We suggest that, besides professional scribes, many Assyrian men and a number of women would have learnt the basics of writing at home. To prove this assumption, we have to identify scribes in a delimited corpus. A large archive of about a thousand of tablets excavated in 1993, and belonging to three generations of merchants of a single family, is chosen as the starting point of the study of all the traces of individual variations. Identifying the "scribe" who wrote a group of letters starts with the study of the shape of the tablet. The ruling is an important feature. The choice of signs as well as the spelling may indicate the level of education of the scribe. The relative position of each wedge within a sign, the space between them, the repeated number of each in one sign provide clues helping to identify scribes' hands. The type and quality of the tool used to form the signs may also be analyzed from the shape of the wedges. All the data will be added to a comparative chart in order to highlight specific characteristics developed by each individual. The aim of this project is to develop new methodology to analyze scribes' hands in a delimited corpus within a society in which writing seems more common than reserved for an élite.



Writing on clay, hands-on experiments.
Photo: Cécile Michel

A sub-project of Learning

Besides evaluating the widespread of literacy, we will try to answer various questions about the organization, content and places of learning, as well as the actors: Is there a curriculum specific to merchants' milieu? What are the tools and texts used for the education of merchants? Is there a standard education at a master's house or was the dissemination of knowledge done at home from a generation to the next? Can we distinguish different levels of education? Is it possible to estimate literacy among women? How many Anatolians were able to read and write in Old Assyrian?



School text



Letter written by educated Assyrian



Letter written by a low educated Anatolian

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