

Christina Tsouparopoulou

# **Hidden messages under the temple: Foundation deposits and the restricted presence of writing in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE Mesopotamia\***

Are all documents written to be read? Do all sponsors and authors of a text have a specific audience in mind? Can texts that are inaccessible and/or out of view be defined as restricted? In 2010, Hilgert brought the subject of the restricted presence of text in focus and a conference was organized on this topic in 2011 within the framework of the CRC 933.<sup>1</sup> In his article, Hilgert<sup>2</sup> used as one example of “restricted presence” the foundation deposits of Mesopotamian rulers. This paper addresses in more detail these written offerings deposited in the foundations of Mesopotamian temples in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium and evaluates aspects of visibility, intended audience and the purpose of “restricting texts”.

## **1 Foundation offerings in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Southern Mesopotamia**

One of the most important functions and obligations of the ruler/king in Mesopotamia was the construction and maintenance of temples. The importance of this is reflected, among others, in the offerings deposited in the foundations of the temples. The ritual interment of foundation deposits during the construction (or renovation) of a new temple is well attested in Mesopotamia already in the Early Dynastic period

---

\* This article emerged from the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre 933 “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies” (Subproject No. C01-UP2 The Materiality and Presence of Writing in the Ancient Mesopotamian Discourse of Power between 2500 and 1800 BC – Archaeology). The CRC 933 is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). – I would like to thank Kristina Sauer for her help with drawing and cataloguing the images that appear in this article and Joana van de Loecht for final corrections and editing. I would also like to thank Wilfried E. Keil for inviting me to write a paper in this volume.

---

1 CRC 933: “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies”, Heidelberg. Workshop at the Department for European Art History, November 12, 2011: “Verborgen, unsichtbar, unlesbar – zur Problematik restringierter Schriftpräsenz”.

2 Hilgert 2010.

(ca. 3000–2350 BCE) and although mentioned in texts,<sup>3</sup> the best evidence for such deposits comes from archaeological discovery.

These foundation deposits were not hoards of objects nor a random compilation of material to be deposited but a purposeful and well-thought act. They were not functional but highly symbolic and of considerable value. A Mesopotamian foundation deposit usually consisted of a copper peg-shaped figurine and a plano-convex brick made of stone. It also occasionally included beads, wooden objects or fragments and chips of stone.<sup>4</sup>

These sets, each consisting of a figurine and a tablet, were usually inscribed with a building inscription<sup>5</sup> recording the name of the king and the building project in a formulaic manner, but surprisingly some were also uninscribed.<sup>6</sup> The inscription on these two objects was similar but not always identical;<sup>7</sup> this discrepancy could be explained by the differing space and material of the two objects.

Foundation deposits were usually positioned at a level below (sometimes directly beneath) the foundations of the building, and at its significant points, including entrance, corners, and other important wall intersections. In the Early Dynastic period, deposits were inserted into the foundations of temples with no special container, but starting with the Ur III period (ca. 2112–2001 BCE) they were always deposited in a receptacle, more commonly a brick box.

Their aura was much recognized by later rulers, especially by Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (556–539 BCE). Nabonidus restored some ancient temples, digging first into their foundations in order to find such foundation deposits, an act related to the legitimization of his rule and serving his royal propaganda.<sup>8</sup> He collected these foundation deposits, along with some other objects, and stored

---

**3** Dunham 1986.

**4** I would like to make a distinction between foundation deposits in Egypt and those of Mesopotamia. Most scholars see a very close correlation between the two, but in fact the differences are much more prevalent. In Egypt, the objects were generally symbolic but related to the construction or the symbolic future repair of the temple: large amounts of miniature tools made of cheap materials, raw building materials, as well as materials related to the replenishment of the royal cult: fruits, bread, linen, precious oils. In Mesopotamia, there were much fewer objects and they had no relation to the symbolic perpetual repair of the building, but were rather abstract and with higher symbolic significance regarding the role the ruler played in the construction of the temple.

**5** Building inscriptions are one type of the so-called royal inscriptions, a category of cuneiform texts mentioning the king and his works, either written on behalf of the king or commemorating an event the king played a principal part (Hallo 1962).

**6** These uninscribed sets of foundation deposits will be treated in more detail in a forthcoming article of the author.

**7** See p. 21 in this article and especially footnote 20.

**8** Weisberg 1998.

them together in rooms of the Giparu, which most likely served as the residence of his daughter Ennigaldi-Nanna.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 An overview of practices concerning foundation deposits<sup>10</sup>

Foundation deposits are first attested in the Early Dynastic II period (for a chronological overview of foundation deposits in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia see Table 1) and become most prevalent from the Early Dynastic III onwards at three sites in Southern Mesopotamia: Tello (Girsu), Lagash and Adab (Fig. 1). Unfortunately the archaeological context for most of these foundation deposits is elusive due to the unscientific methods of excavation and recording.<sup>11</sup>

The first proper foundation deposits of anthropomorphic figurines were uninscribed. Such uninscribed peg-shaped figurines made of copper were found at Tell K in Tello under the so-called “construction inférieure”, a structure that was probably the early third millennium temple of the god Ningirsu. Beneath a pavement of gypsum slabs, several foundation peg figurines, measuring 7 to 17 cm in height, were laid together in groups in concentric circles (Fig. 1g). Other such figurines were found under what appeared to be the corners of the rooms while others were not properly documented.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the exact relationship of these foundation deposits with the architecture of the earliest temple remains obscure.

The first inscribed foundation deposits are to be found with Ur-Nanshe, the founder of the First Dynasty of Lagash. In the area around the “Maison des fruits” in Tello, several sets of foundation offerings were deposited.<sup>13</sup> The foundation deposit sets were now different from the ones found in the earliest Temple of Ningirsu at the “construction inférieure”. They consisted of a copper peg figurine about 15 cm in height and a flat piece of copper in the shape of a disc pierced with a round hole,

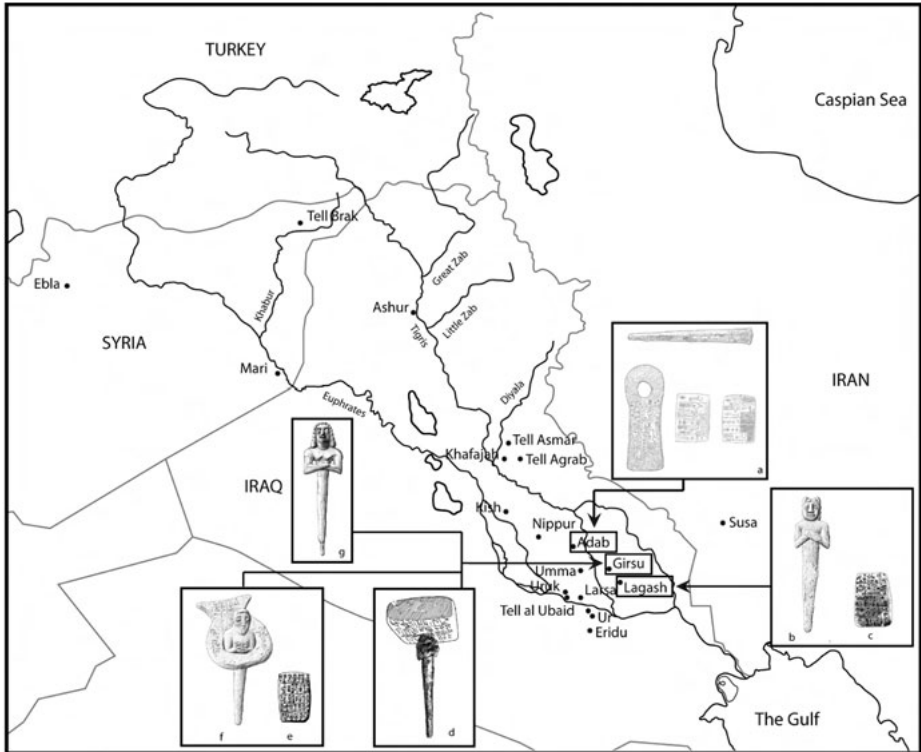
<sup>9</sup> Woolley 1962, 17. Whether Nabonidus was the first ‘archaeologist’ (Winter 2000) or not (Schaudig 2003, 490–497), is not within the scope of this paper, nor are his fundamental reasons for collecting and displaying such ‘antiquities’. For a discussion of these, see Beaulieu 1994, Weisberg 1998 with references to previous scholarship on this topic as well as the most recent book by Thomason 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The most authoritative treatment so far on foundation deposits is Ellis 1968. However, since more such deposits have been unearthed since its publication, it is worth reviewing the material here once more.

<sup>11</sup> Many objects that once must have been part of foundation deposits have found their way to collections and museums worldwide. However, because of their uncontextualised nature and the limited information they could provide us, these objects are not discussed here.

<sup>12</sup> de Sarzec 1884–1912, 239, 414.

<sup>13</sup> de Sarzec 1884–1912, pl. 5 ter; Parrot 1948, 63.



**Fig. 1:** Map of Mesopotamia showing sets of foundation deposits dated to the Early Dynastic period

a so-called ‘fish-tail’ (Fig. 1f; Table 1b). The fish-tail shaped plaque was laid flat on the mud-brick and the peg of the figure was thrust vertically down through the hole and into the earth. Both the figurine and the fish-tail were inscribed with a six-line inscription dealing with Ur-Nanshe’s construction of the “Shrine-Girsu”. In five of these deposits an inscribed stone tablet shaped like a plano-convex brick was added (Fig. 1e) and was laid flat over the head of the figure. The text on the pegs and the fish-tail plaques is similar only with minor differences,<sup>14</sup> whereas the text on the stone tablets is different documenting the construction of several temples, the manufacture of statues and waterworks.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary with Ur-Nanshe’s foundation deposits must be the deposit of the ruler E’iginimpa’e, found at Adab on Mound V underneath the so-called Later Temple. The Earlier Temple on Mound V was a baked plano-convex brick structure. After it was filled with mud brick, the baked plano-convex brick structure was covered with

<sup>14</sup> Frayne 2008, E1.9.1.7.

<sup>15</sup> Frayne 2008, E1.9.1.9–18.

a course of baked brick and bitumen; upon this bitumen pavement, Banks found a number of objects, including four items from a foundation deposit of E'iginimpa'e, ruler of Adab.<sup>16</sup> The deposit consisted of an inscribed adze-shaped copper object with a copper spike inserted into the hole at its end and two tablets, one of copper alloy and one of white stone (Fig. 1a; Table 1c).<sup>17</sup>

Most information for the Early Dynastic practices concerning foundation deposits comes from Al-Hiba (ancient Lagash) with the excavations conducted by Donald Hansen.<sup>18</sup> In 'Area A', Hansen unearthed a partially preserved temple from the Early Dynastic III B, dated to the rule of Enannatum I of Lagash. Ten foundation deposits were discovered there, buried within and at the bottom of the platform. Each was placed within the middle of the wall. Seven consisted of a copper figurine and an inscribed stone found together, while the remaining three contained only the stone tablet (Fig. 1b, 1c; Table 1d, 1e). The practice of depositing such offerings was now different from that followed by previous rulers: as the foundation was built, the peg figurine was stuck vertically between the mud bricks, reaching the ground. It was then covered with layers of bricks up to its neckline. The stone tablet was placed flat behind the head of the peg, touching its upper edge, and then both were completely covered. The inscribed stone tablets provided much information: the temple was the Oval Temple (Ibgal), built by Enannatum I ruler of Lagash and was dedicated to goddess Inana. Interestingly the text also provides information on the peg figurines, recognizing them as representing Shulutula, the personal god of Enannatum I.

Foundation deposits of the ruler Enmetena have also been excavated at Tello, at Tell K, northeast of Ur-Nanshe's building. Buried beneath the pavement of the so-called 'Enmetena's esplanade', and delimiting a rectangular area around the burnt brick monuments of Enmetena, five foundation deposits were found in situ. Only their relative findspot is however given in the publication.<sup>19</sup> These groups of foundation deposits consisted of a copper figurine and an alabaster tablet with a hole in its central part, into which the head of the peg figurine was thrust (Fig.1d; Table 1f). Both the figurine and the tablet were inscribed documenting that Enmetena constructed a brewery for Ningirsu. The tablet however had a 57-lines long inscription while the figurine had a short 12-lines inscription.<sup>20</sup>

---

**16** Banks 1912, 200, 275.

**17** Wilson 2012, 93–95.

**18** Hansen 1970; Hansen 1992.

**19** de Sarzec 1884–1912, 420; Parrot 1948, 66.

**20** Frayne 2008, E1.9.5.12–13. The location of a brewery in the "esplanade" area of Tell K may be related to the large number of wells unearthed by de Sarzec in this precinct.

After a break during the Akkadian period,<sup>21</sup> foundation deposits of Ur-Bau and Gudea, rulers of Lagash, reappear at Tello dated to the Second Dynasty of Lagash. On Tell A, de Sarzec found a clay jar which contained a copper figurine and a tablet of white marble, deposited under a corner of the Temple of Ningirsu that Ur-Bau had built (Table 1g).<sup>22</sup> The figurine represents a kneeling god holding a peg. On the upper part of the peg, there is an inscription documenting that Ur-Bau built the Eninnu, the Temple of Ningirsu, while the tablet – inscribed only on the obverse – records the construction of several buildings including the Eninnu.<sup>23</sup> On Tell B, northeast of the Eninnu, Ellis<sup>24</sup> mentions that de Sarzec found a box of baked bricks on the southern corner of an unidentified building made of large bricks, within which a similar figurine was deposited. Ellis dates it to Ur-Bau, based on the inscribed bricks on the superimposed structure, though the inscription on the object itself is corroded and no tablet was found accompanying it.

It seems that everywhere around Tello – on Tell A and the triangle between the Tells A, B, and K – under the foundations of buildings constructed by Gudea, boxes made of mud-bricks were found in which a figurine and a tablet in the shape of a plano-convex brick were deposited. According to Suter,<sup>25</sup> 41 foundation tablets of Gudea have been found, 18 at Tello, one at Zurghul, one at Uruk, one at Ur, and 20 are of unknown provenance. Furthermore, 42 foundation figurines have also been found, 28 at Tello, one at Zurghul, and twelve are of unknown provenance. Many such brick-boxes were empty and others seem to have been disturbed in antiquity, thus making Gudea's depositing practices obscure and difficult to study.

However, two innovations in the practices concerning foundation deposits were brought forward by Gudea: the use of brick-boxes as containers for the foundation offerings, and the canephore/basket-carrier figure as part of the deposit set. Even though the most numerous figurine in Gudea's deposits is the "kneeling god" (33 in total) – first used by Ur-Bau (Table 1g) – and there are also three crouching bulls (Table 1i), there are five basket carriers which appear for the first time in the foundation deposits of Gudea (Table 1h).<sup>26</sup> The canephore, basket-carrying figure, represents the king as a builder and manifests the ruler's personal involvement in the temple construction. This figurine becomes standard with the Ur III kings.

---

**21** For the Akkadian period we have virtually no contextualized foundation deposits. This is not difficult to relate since we have not yet found the capital city of Akkad, but this could also be explained by the abrupt change in tradition that king Sargon of Agade brought forward. For the unique Hurrian foundation deposits from Urkesh, also known as the Urkesh lions, see Muscarella 1988, 374–377. It should be noted that both foundation deposits from Urkesh have no archaeological context.

**22** de Sarzec 1884–1912, pl. 8bis; Parrot 1948, 144.

**23** Edzard 1997, E3/1.1.6.6.

**24** Ellis 1968, 60f.

**25** Suter 2000, 29–31.

**26** Suter 2000, 29–31.

It is also in this period that we are acquainted with the rituals surrounding the building ceremonies as performed by the ruler. This information comes from the so-called Gudea cylinders,<sup>27</sup> but nonetheless it appears also limited when compared to the Neo-Assyrian texts documenting building ceremonies.<sup>28</sup>

From Gudea onwards, and especially during the Ur III period, foundation deposits were placed within boxes made of baked bricks and consisted always of a canephore figure of the king and a stone tablet in the shape of a plano-convex brick. Most examples of foundation offerings come from this period. Most deposits have been found in situ, well contextualized. Foundation deposits have been found at Ur, Nippur, Uruk, Girsu and Susa and as far north as Mari. I will discuss in much more detail the foundation deposits dated to the Ur III period and unearthed in Nippur, Ur, Uruk and Susa; the reason being that this is the period when the foundation offerings and the way of depositing them became standard. It is in this period that the foundation box was an irreplaceable component of the offerings. This tradition started with Ur-Bau as we saw before, was used in Gudea's time and was consolidated with kings Ur-Nammu and Shulgi.

The boxes in which the foundation deposits were put were almost identical in construction at all sites, with slight differences in the laying of the bricks. Each box was made of big baked bricks measuring around 30 cm square and 8 cm thick. When a box was to be closed, a reed mat was placed over the opening at the top, bitumen was spread over the mat, and three capping bricks were put into place, one laid on top of two. The lower side of the capping bricks usually bore a building inscription documenting the king who built the temple, reminiscent of the inscriptions on the figurines and the stone tablet.

These boxes were located under the foundations of the temples in places marking their perimeter or their doorways. We can now say that the temple was planned and executed accurately. The foundation boxes were placed at points important both for the construction of the temples and also for the functioning of the temple. They 'led the way' within the temple.

A standardized accumulation of objects was laid inside such foundation boxes. A copper canephore figure and a stone tablet (usually of steatite or limestone) were always included, and sometimes other objects were also present, such as beads, date pits and stone chips. Wooden fragments have also been found – in some cases they seemed to have been figurines similar to the copper ones. The copper figurine was wrapped in cloth and measured approximately 30 cm in height. The tablets, which were shaped like plano-convex bricks, measured around 10 × 5 cm.

---

<sup>27</sup> See especially Suter 2000, 92f. and references therein.

<sup>28</sup> Wiggermann 1992 and more recently Ambos 2004.

Dates	Period	King / Rulers	City State of Lagash (Tello and Lagash)	Adab	South / Susa
c. 2700-2600 BCE	Early Dynastic II		a		
c. 2600-2450 BCE	Early Dynastic III A	Ur-Nanshe / E'iginimpa'e of Adab	b	c	
		Akurgal of Lagash			
		Eannatum of Lagash / Mesanepada of Ur			
		Enannatum I of Lagash	d  e		
c. 2450-2350 BCE	Early Dynastic III B	Enmetena of Lagash	f		
		Enannatum II of Lagash			
		Enentarzi of Lagash			
		Lugalanda of Lagash			
c. 2380 BCE		UruKagina of Lagash			
c. 2350-2170 BCE	Akkadian				
	Lagash II	Ur-Bau	g		
		Gudea	h  i		
c. 2112-2004 BCE	Ur III				j  k  l

**Table 1:** Chronological overview of foundation deposits in 3rd millennium Mesopotamia



## 3 The Ur III foundation deposits

### 3.1 The Temenos at Ur<sup>29</sup>

At the temenos at Ur, foundation boxes with deposits of the common type have been unearthed at the Temple of Nanna, the Ehursag, and the Temple of Nimintabba, while a stone tablet naming Ur-Nammu and the Emah of Ninsun was found loose in debris. At the Temple of Nimintabba, five deposits of Shulgi have been found. Under each wall junction along the length of the outer northeastern wall a deposit set of a cane-phore figure and a steatite stone tablet was found within a box made of mud-bricks (Table 11). One of these sets, the one on the uppermost corner was uninscribed.

According to contemporary tablets, Shulgi built the Ehursag in his 10<sup>th</sup> regnal year. Nonetheless in the building there are bricks bearing Ur-Nammu's dedication. Even though it is generally said that the Ehursag lied within the temenos area, it is most possible that it was directly outside of it. Three boxes were found, one under the southern corner, one under the eastern corner and one on one side of a doorway leading from the entry room to the main courtyard. All three sets of foundation offerings deposited within boxes were completely uninscribed and only a single brick was capping the box, whereas the usual practice demanded three.

A brick foundation box was also uncovered in the area of the so-called House of Nanna, northwest of the Ziggurat. It was found under the west corner of the main block of buildings along the northwest side of the Ziggurat Court, but the box had been opened and left empty. A brick on its base was stamped with Ur-Nammu's name. Door-sockets found in situ in this building also bore Ur-Nammu's inscription and recognized the building as the E-Nanna, the 'House' of god Nanna.

### 3.2 Nippur<sup>30</sup>

Ten foundation deposits in total have been found in situ at Nippur at the Temple of Inana and at the Ekur. In the Inana Temple seven boxes were found containing uninscribed sets of peg-shaped figurines and stone tablets;<sup>31</sup> six were under the three monumental gateways that led toward the sanctuary, while the seventh was probably also under a tower. Both architectural elaboration and the location of the foundation deposits indicate that the sanctuary of the Inana temple was in its southern corner,

<sup>29</sup> For the foundation deposits at Ur see Woolley 1926; 1939 and 1974 as well as Zettler 1986 and Ellis 1968, 63–64.

<sup>30</sup> For the foundation deposits at Nippur see Haines 1956, Haines 1958 and Zettler 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Haines 1956.

behind (to the southeast of) Locus 118, the part of the building directly over the sanctuaries of earlier versions of the temple.

In the Ekur two foundation boxes of Ur-Nammu were found under the towers that flanked the gateway from the outer to the inner court of the temple, and one more was found later in situ below the northern corner of the enclosure wall.<sup>32</sup> All deposits contained a copper figurine of Ur-Nammu, though not peg-shaped, an inscribed stone tablet, beads and unworked chips of various stones. The deposit under the southwestern buttress (for the figurine see Table 1j) also contained balls of gold foil, while the deposit in the northern corner of the Ekur had beads of frit and gold and four date pits perched on the basket of the figurine. The deposits of the Ekur were peculiar not only because of the date pits, but also because of the shape of the figurines of Ur-Nammu, which in contrast to all others were not peg-shaped.

### 3.3 Uruk<sup>33</sup>

In the Eanna Temple at Uruk in total six foundation deposits were found, which all seem to flank doorways. Four were Ur-Nammu's and included apart from the cane-*phore* figure (Table 1k) and the stone tablet, eleven beads, gold, rock crystal and carnelian chips and wood fragments. Shulgi's deposits did not include such a variety of objects, but only the cane-*phore* figure and the tablet. Only two undisturbed foundation deposits of Ur-Nammu have been found: one was beneath the gate which lead from the 'Pfeilerhallenhof' to the court, and the other lay most probably beneath one side of a gate, close to the outer wall of the 'Zingel' of Eanna. The remaining two deposits of Ur-Nammu, although empty, were left at their original position, each flanking a gate. The two deposits of Shulgi were found flanking a gate in the 'W Aussenzingel' of Eanna.

### 3.4 Susa<sup>34</sup>

Foundation deposits of the Ur III kings were found as far as Susa. Towards the western center of the Acropolis, the religious complex of the Inshushinak and Ninhursag temples was excavated. In the foundations of these two temples eight brick boxes were unearthed, containing a foundation figurine and a tablet. Both bore the same inscription of Shulgi.

At the Temple of Inshushinak eight deposit sets were found, each consisting a cane-*phore* and a stone tablet. The arrangement of these seems to form a large rec-

---

<sup>32</sup> Haines 1958.

<sup>33</sup> For the foundation deposits at Uruk see van Ess 2001, 163–167.

<sup>34</sup> For the foundation deposits at Susa see Mecquenem 1911, 67–72.

tangle enclosing a smaller one. This arrangement reminds that of the Temple of Nimintabba at Ur along the wall and could perhaps have had a similar function: to delineate the sanctuary of the temple. Also, eight deposits were unearthed at the Temple of Ninhursag, consisting again of a canephore and a stone tablet; their arrangement was also similar to the Temple of Inshushinak and to the Temple of Nimintabba at Ur.

## 4 Discussion

It is evident that all these inscribed objects were hidden from the public eye for millennia. Most probably they were conceived in the first place to be restricted from viewing and handling. The fact that they were inscribed raises even more questions on their intended audience, if such existed, and brings into the forth questions concerning the uses and functions of documents.

The practice of hiding documents in so-called time capsules<sup>35</sup> with the intention that they are found and read by later generations is not new. Even sending gold-plated copper disks with sounds and images of Earth to outer space is known (Voyager). Both serve an intended audience; the capsules carry messages for future generations when they will be unearthed, Voyager carries messages for intelligent beings in the universe. Does the practice of hiding for posterity documents with royal inscriptions resemble the function of these time capsules?

These objects do not adhere to the challenge that Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* brought up on primary documents. Foucault questioned the ways primary documents are used in the quest for historical science and postmodernists brought into focus the very functionality of primary documents. Foucault's ideas that documents are monuments and should be treated as such of course raises more possibilities to the study of documents but at the same time limits the actual use and function of hiding an inscription from public view. Should meaning be found in the actual praxis of depositing such objects? Should we treat these inscribed objects similarly to the chips of stones found within these foundation deposits? Or should we try to dwell deeper and accept that writing gave these objects a new meaning, irrespective of their future functionality?<sup>36</sup>

The scholarly lore postulates that since the foundation deposits were buried, they were never intended as a public record of the ruler's building activities, at least not for the ruler's contemporaries.<sup>37</sup> Oppenheim<sup>38</sup> suggested that some texts were not to be read by humans; they were a conversation between man and god, and not between

---

<sup>35</sup> For time capsules see the article of Johannes Endres in this volume, pp. 215–232.

<sup>36</sup> Wengrow 2005, 265–267.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis 1968, 166f.; Hallo 1962.

<sup>38</sup> Oppenheim 1964, 146–148.

man and man. The foundation deposits and the text on them could also be seen in this light: these carriers of text were intended to link the ruler with the gods and not the mortals. It was a text to be read by the gods. This explanation has also been given recently in an article stipulating that these stone plaques/tablets were deposited in such a way indicating the intention of the people who deposited them (and consequently the ruler) to make the text easily readable and accessible to the gods.<sup>39</sup>

One other explanation is that these text carriers were meant to pass on a royal message to future rulers unearthing these deposits in the course of their own building activities. And this activity, as we saw at the beginning, was not unknown. Thus, it is possible that there was an intended audience, far into the future, and that this act recorded the ruler who commissioned and built those temples for posterity.<sup>40</sup>

But, what if the message carried on this text was also not restricted in the present? Porter<sup>41</sup> invites us to imagine that, in later periods, the priests responsible for the rituals over the construction of a temple recited the text written on the objects to a large audience before depositing them. However, which text would they have recited if this were also a practice prevalent in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE: the long inscription written on the stone tablets, the shorter one of the figurine, or the one on the bricks that both covered the foundation boxes and were inserted into the walls? Did they really recite one of these inscriptions or did they have an altogether different text they were supposed to say? Was the written text then evidential proof that the ruler did indeed commission and (re)build the temple, thus fulfilling his cultic obligations?

Nonetheless, the text had already reached another audience, contemporary with its message: the scribes that were commissioned to transfer it to these objects.<sup>42</sup> Whether this was intentional or not is not easy to say, but certainly a transfer of knowledge had taken place, either as a propagandistic mechanism or an 'unintentional' transmission of the royal message.

From the above we can conclude that indeed there was an audience for the message written on these inscribed objects, either be the gods, or the future rulers, or the contemporary 'commoners'. This knowledge transfer would of course be complicated by several factors, such as the inaccessibility of the text carrier, but the fact is that the message did indeed get through to many different audiences: future kings, gods, contemporary scribes, and perhaps the 'commoners' present in the rituals surrounding the construction of the temple. But since the audience seems to have been so broad, could we indeed speak of a restricted presence of the text?

---

<sup>39</sup> Pearce 2010, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Oppenheim 1964, 146–148.

<sup>41</sup> Porter 1993, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Porter 1993, 109f.

## Bibliography

- Ambos (2004): Claus Ambos, *Mesopotamische Baurituale aus dem 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Dresden.
- Banks (1912): Edgar J. Banks, *Bismya or the lost city of Adab*, New York.
- Beaulieu (1994): Paul-Alain Beaulieu, „Antiquarianism and the concern for the past in the Neo-Babylonian period“, *Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian society* 28, 37–42.
- de Sarzec (1884–1912): Ernest de Sarzec, *Découvertes en Chaldée*, Paris.
- Dunham (1986): Sally Dunham, „Sumerian words for foundation“, *Revue d'Assyriologie* 80, 31–64.
- Edzard (1997): Dietz Otto Edzard, *Gudea and his dynasty*. (The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early periods, 3.1), Toronto.
- Ellis (1968): Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation deposits in ancient Mesopotamia*, New Haven (CT).
- Foucault (1969): Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris.
- Frayne (2008): Douglas R. Frayne, *Presargonic period (2700–2350 BC)*. (The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods, I) Toronto.
- Haines (1956): Richard C. Haines, „Where a goddess of love and war was worshipped 4000 years ago“, *The Illustrated London News* 229, 226–229.
- Haines (1958): Richard C. Haines, „Further excavations at the Temple of Inanna“, *The Illustrated London News* 233, 386–389.
- Hallo (1962): William W. Hallo, „The royal inscriptions of Ur. A typology“, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 33, 1–43.
- Hansen (1970): Donald P. Hansen, „Al-Hiba, 1968–1969, a preliminary report“, *Artibus Asiae* 32/4, 243–258.
- Hansen (1992): Donald P. Hansen, „Royal building activity at Sumerian Lagash in the Early Dynastic period“, *The Biblical Archaeologist* 55/4, 206–211.
- Hilgert (2010): Markus Hilgert, „'Text-Anthropologie'. Die Erforschung von Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen als hermeneutische Strategie“, *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orientalgesellschaft* 142, 87–126.
- Mecquenem (1911): Roland de Mecquenem, „Constructions élamites du Tell de l'Acropole de Suse“, *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse* 12, 65–78.
- Muscarella (1988): Oscar White Muscarella, *Bronze and Iron: Ancient Near Eastern Artifacts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York.
- Oppenheim (1964): Adolf Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia. Portrait of a dead civilization*, Chicago (IL).
- Parrot (1948): André Parrot, *Tello. Vingt campagnes de fouilles (1877–1933)*, Paris.
- Pearce (2010): Laurie E. Pierce, „Materials of writing and materiality of knowledge“, in: Jeffrey Stackert, Barbara N. Porter u. David P. Wright (Hgg.), *Gazing on the deep (Ancient Near Eastern and other studies in honor of Tzvi Abusch)*, Bethesda (MD), 167–179.
- Porter (1993): Barbara N. Porter, *Images, power, and politics. Figurative aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian policy* (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, 208), Philadelphia (PA).
- Rashid (1983): Subhi Anwar Rashid, *Gründungsfiguren im Iraq* (Diss. Frankfurt a.M., 1965) (Prähistorische Bronzefunde, 1/2), München.
- Schaudig (2003): Hanspeter Schaudig, „Nabonid, der ‚Archäologe auf dem Königsthron‘“, in: Gebhard J. Selz (Hg.), *Festschrift für Burkhard Kienast zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, Münster, 447–497.
- Suter (2000): Claudia E. Suter, *Gudea's temple building. The representation of an early Mesopotamian ruler in text and image* (Cuneiform Monographs, 17), Groningen.
- Thomason (2005): Allison Karmel Thomason, *Luxury and legitimation. Royal collecting in ancient Mesopotamia*, Aldershot.

- van Ess (2001): Margarete van Ess, Uruk. Architektur, Bd. 2: *Von der Akkad- bis zur mittelbabylonischen Zeit*, Teil 1: *Das Eanna-Heiligtum zur Ur III- und altbabylonischen Zeit* (Ausgrabungen in Uruk-Warka, 15), Mainz.
- Weisberg (1998): David B. Weisberg, „The ‚antiquarian‘ interests of the Neo-Babylonian kings“, in: Joan G. Westenholz (Hg.), *Capital cities. Urban planning and spiritual dimensions* (Proceedings of the Symposium held on May 27–29, 1996, Jerusalem, Israel) (Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem Publications, 2), Jerusalem, 177–186.
- Wengrow (2005): David Wengrow, „Violence into order. Materiality and sacred power in ancient Iraq“, in: Elizabeth DeMarrais, Colin Renfrew u. Chris Gosden (Hgg.), *Rethinking Materiality. The engagement of mind with the material world*, Cambridge, 261–270.
- Wiggermann (1992): Frans A. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian protective spirits*. The ritual texts (Cuneiform Monographs, 1), Groningen.
- Wilson (2012): Karen L. Wilson, Bismaya. *Recovering the lost city of Adab* (Oriental Institute Publications, 138), Chicago (IL).
- Winter (2000): Irene J. Winter, „Babylonian archaeologists of the(ir) Mesopotamian past“, in: Paolo Matthiae u. a. (Hgg.), *Proceedings of the First International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, Bd. 2, Rom, 1785–1800.
- Woolley (1926): Charles Leonard Woolley, „The excavations at Ur, 1925–26“, *The Antiquaries Journal* 6/4, 365–401.
- Woolley (1939): Charles Leonard Woolley, *The Ziggurat and its surroundings* (Ur Excavations, 5), London/Philadelphia (PA).
- Woolley (1962): Charles Leonard Woolley, *The Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods* (Ur Excavations, 9), London/Philadelphia (PA).
- Woolley (1974): Charles Leonard Woolley, *The buildings of the Third Dynasty* (Ur Excavations, 6), London/Philadelphia (PA).
- Zettler (1986): Richard L. Zettler, „From beneath the temple. Inscribed objects from Ur“, *Expedition* 28/3, 29–38.
- Zettler (1992): Richard L. Zettler, *The Ur III Inanna Temple at Nippur* (Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient, 11), Berlin.

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Map of Mesopotamia showing sets of foundation deposits dated to the Early Dynastic period, drawn by Kristina Sauer.

- a. Foundation deposit of E'iginimpa'e from Adab, dated to the Early Dynastic IIIa period, consisting of a white stone tablet (A1159), a copper tablet (A1160), a bronze nail-spike (A 542) and an adze-shaped plaque (A543), all inscribed. Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago. Modified by K. Sauer, after Wilson 2012, Pl. 61.
- b. One of the figurines of Shulutula, the personal god of Enannatum I, ruler of Lagash, found in the Oval Temple, the Ibgal of Inana at Al-Hiba (Lagash), now possibly at the Iraq Museum, Baghdad. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 5.49.
- c. Stone tablet bearing the same inscription as the figurine of Shulutula, found behind the head of one of such figurines at the Ibgal of Inana at Al-Hiba (Lagash). Modified by K. Sauer, after Hansen 1970, Fig. 13.
- d. Foundation figurine from Tell K at Tello (Girsu), dated to the rule of Enmetena with its head thrust into the alabaster tablet. Both figurine and tablet are inscribed. After Parrot 1948, Fig. 25b.

- e. Foundation tablet found laying flat over the head of the figurines with the fish-tail plaque. Found in the area around the “Maison des fruits” in Tello (Girsu) and dated to the rule of Ur-Nanshe. Modified by K. Sauer, after de Sarzec 1884-1912, Pl. 2ter.2.
- f. Copper peg figurine with a flat piece of copper in the shape of a disc pierced with a round hole, called a ‘fish-tail’. Found in the area around the “Maison des fruits” in Tello (Girsu) and dated to the rule of Ur-Nanshe. AO 254, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Paris. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 5.44.
- g. Uninscribed copper foundation figurine from Tello (Girsu), dated to Early Dynastic II period. AO 319, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Paris. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 1.5.

Table 1: Chronological overview of foundation deposits in third millennium Mesopotamia

Figures within table 1:

- a. Uninscribed copper foundation figurine from Tello (Girsu), dated to the Early Dynastic II period. AO 319, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Paris. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 1.5.
- b. Copper foundation figurine and plaque; both the figurine and the plaque are inscribed. Dated to the reign of Ur-Nanshe, possibly found at Tello (Girsu). BM 96565 © Trustees of the British Museum.
- c. Foundation deposit of E'iginimpa'e from Adab, dated to the Early Dynastic IIIa period, consisting of a white stone tablet (A1159), a copper tablet (A1160), a bronze nail-spike (A 542) and an adze-shaped plaque (A543), all inscribed. Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago. Modified by K. Sauer, after Wilson 2012, Pl. 61.
- d. One of the figurines of Shulutula, the personal god of Enannatum I, ruler of Lagash, found in the Oval Temple, the Ibgal of Inana at Al-Hiba (Lagash), possibly now at the Iraq Museum, Baghdad. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 5.49.
- e. Stone tablet bearing the same inscription as the figurine of Shulutula, found behind the head of one of such figurines at the Ibgal of Inana at Al-Hiba (Lagash). Modified by K. Sauer, after Hansen 1970, Fig. 13.
- f. Foundation figurine from Tell K at Tello (Girsu), dated to the rule of Enmetena with its head thrust into the alabaster tablet. Both figurine and tablet are inscribed. After Parrot 1948, Fig. 25b.
- g. Foundation figurine of a kneeling god and a foundation tablet made of white marble, found within the clay jar depicted here. Dated to the reign of Ur-Bau, from Tell A at Tello (Girsu). After de Sarzec 1884-1912, Taf. 8bis 1-3.
- h. Copper foundation canephore figurine. Dated to Gudea's reign, from Tello (Girsu). AO 26678, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Paris. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 19.113
- i. Copper foundation figurine of a crouching bull. Dated to Gudea's reign, from Tell M at Tello (Girsu). MNB 1374, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Paris. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 20.116.
- j. Inscribed copper canephore figurine of Ur-Nammu. Found under the southwestern tower of the Ekur at Nippur. IM 59586, Iraq Museum, Baghdad. After Rashid 1983, Pl. 21.120
- k. Foundation canephore figurine of Ur-Nammu from Uruk. BM 113896 © Trustees of the British Museum.
- l. Black steatite foundation tablet of Shulgi from the Nimintabba temple at Ur. BM 118560 © Trustees of the British Museum.

