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Spreading the Royal Word: The (Im)Materiality of Communication in Early Mesopotamia*

This article discusses the communicative processes employed by rulers in Mesopotamia, especially in the third millennium BCE, to reach both their literate and illiterate audiences and transfer their ‘knowledge’. It is during the third millennium that city-states and empires emerged in the Fertile Crescent and an emphasis on the creation and maintenance of royal and elite ideology in the material and written record is conspicuous. The focus of this paper is on objects and practices in three periods in Mesopotamian history: the Early Dynastic, the Akkadian and the Ur III periods.

During the Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BCE), Mesopotamia was politically divided among many competing city-states, each with its own succession of rulers and dynasties. It is in this period that the first palaces are built and evidence of elite ideology is prevalent in the material record. Commissioned statues depicting the rulers were brought into temples, and a thriving class of elites arose, aiming to consolidate and stabilize their rule and power through the divine realm. Demand for luxury and exotic objects and raw materials reached a high point, and trade routes linking Southern Mesopotamia with the Persian Gulf, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Indus Valley were secured. The expression of this accumulated wealth in exotica can be seen chiefly at the Royal Cemetery in Ur.¹

The rival city-states in much of Mesopotamia and northern Syria were later unified by conquest under Sargon, the first king of the first empire in the world, the Akkadian empire (2350–2150 BCE). Sargon was succeeded by his two sons, Rimush and Manishtushu. Under Naram-Sin, the latter’s son, the empire reached its peak. Naram-Sin was the first king in Mesopotamian history to be deified, an exception rather than the rule in Ancient Near Eastern kingship traditions.² Naram-Sin’s son Sharkalisharri did not seem to have followed his father’s deification practice. By the end of Sharkalisharri’s reign, the Akkadian empire had collapsed and a dark age prevailed in Mesopotamia for a few years, while city-states in the south, such as at Lagash and Uruk, had re-asserted their independence.

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1 Woolley 1934; Zettler/Horne 1998.

2 Cooper 2008.

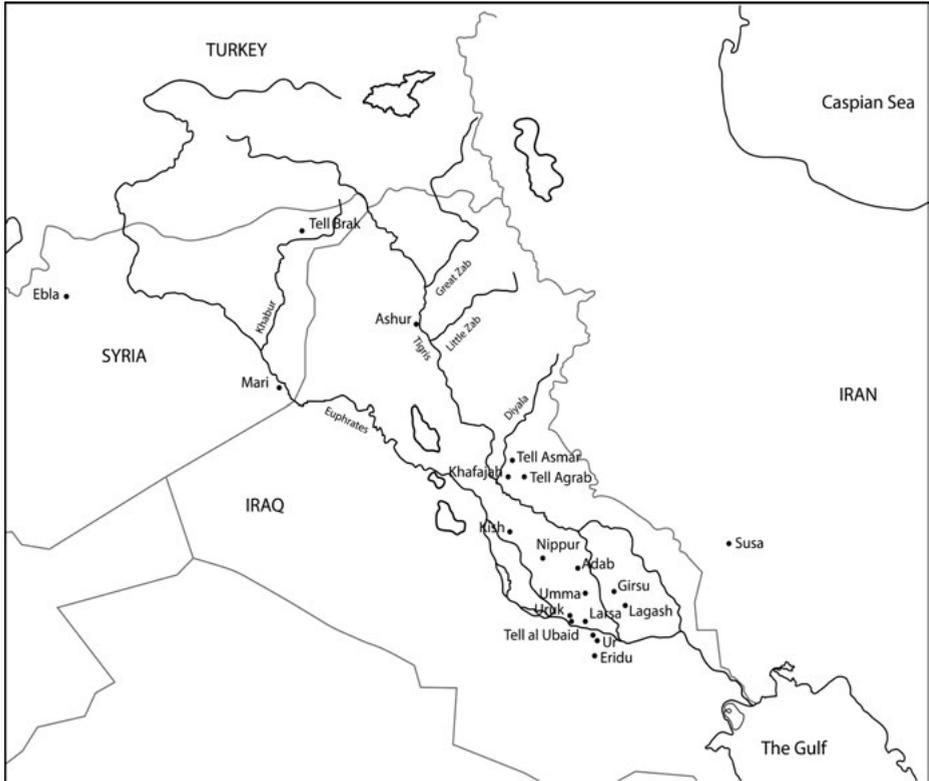


Fig. 1: Map of ancient Mesopotamia, with cities mentioned in the text.

The so-called ‘Ur III Dynasty’ was established by the general Ur-Namma and dominated a large territory of the region, stretching east into Iran and north towards the borders of Northeastern Syria, Northern Iraq and Northwestern Iran (2112–2004 BCE). Shulgi, a son of Ur-Namma, ruled for 48 years and was deified during his reign. He was succeeded by Amar-Sin, Shu-Sin and Ibbi-Sin and the Ur III ‘empire’ fell when the Elamites invaded from the East and took Ur, the capital of the Dynasty.

Examples for the materiality and immateriality of communication from these three periods in Mesopotamian history will be discussed in detail in the following pages. The aim is to show how rulers and elites spread the royal word, or the knowledge of their power. By knowledge, I mean here “*something that moves from one person to another; something that may be shared by members of a profession, a social class, a geographic region or even an entire civilization*”.³ Knowledge seems to travel through a network with nodes, links and vehicles. “*Nodes*” are “*the possessors or potential*

³ Renn/Hyman 2012, 20.

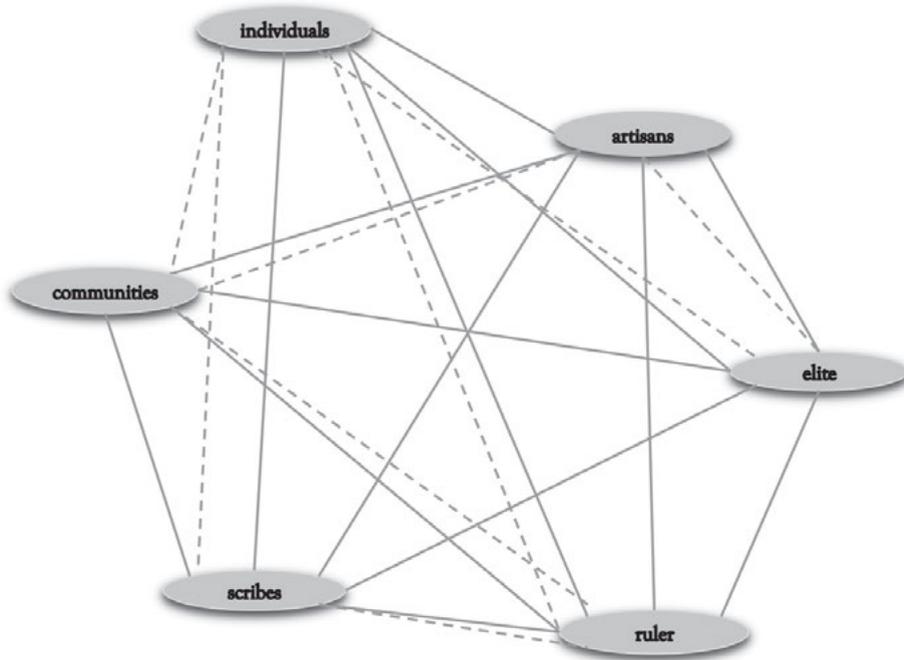


Fig. 2: Schematic diagram of communication network in early Mesopotamia. Lines refer to direct communication, dashed lines to indirect ways of communication.

possessors of knowledge, such as individuals, groups of artisans,”⁴ or elite communities. “*Links*” are “*the routes that knowledge follows to travel from one node to another*,”⁵ and can be seen in the vehicles by and with which knowledge was transmitted: artifacts intended as representations of knowledge, such as letters, and objects not explicitly intended for that, which I term ‘non-communicative’. The spoken language was also such a vehicle. In this article I focus on the links and vehicles by which knowledge traveled. The nodes are the king/ruler, the elite, the scribal community, the artisans and the people (fig. 2).

The flow of information in early Mesopotamia can be roughly thought of as a direct and indirect or vertical and horizontal process. The communication of the royal message was achieved mainly through direct means, be they oral, visual, written or based on a symbiosis of text and image, oral and written. But there were also processes by which the royal message was indirectly conveyed to the people. This was achieved through word of mouth, through gossiping or by spreading the news

⁴ Renn/Hyman 2012, 28.

⁵ Renn/Hyman 2012, 28.

and discussing it, rather than proclaiming it. I will now discuss these processes of knowledge transfer, and will briefly present communicative and non-communicative objects, crucial in both chains of information flow.

1 Direct Communication

1.1 Letters

The Mesopotamian communicative apparatus par excellence is the letter. It combines all three direct forms of communication, namely the written, the visual and the oral.



Fig. 3: Clay tablet; Akkadian letter; BM 121205, 1930,0409.1, AN604407 © Trustees of the British Museum.

Thousands of letters exist in museums and collections around the world. People communicated their business, their problems, and their orders by letters. They might themselves know how to write a letter, or they might have asked for the intervention of a scribe. Many categories of letters are known: diplomatic letters, for example, royal letters and letters from and to ambassadors; official letters; business letters, such as letters from and to merchants; and private letters.

A famous letter, dated to the Akkadian period, is pictured below (fig. 3). This letter, sent from a certain Ishkun-Dagan to his servant Lugal-ra and published for the first time in 1932 by Smith, has been re-edited and quoted innumerable times, for it is supposed to shed light on the fall of the Akkadian empire and especially the end of the reign of Sharkalisharri, the king of Akkad, after the invasion of the Gutians. In this letter, which has no archaeological context and is thus difficult to ascribe to a specific household in Mesopotamia, Ishkun-Dagan encourages his servant Lugal-ra to plough the field and to ignore the nearby Gutians.

Till the land and guard the livestock. And don't you dare say, "There were Gutians about, so I couldn't till the land!" Position detachments of scouts at half-league intervals and get on with tilling the land. If they spy men coming, they can attack on your behalf, while you get the livestock safely into town.⁶

Apart from relaying information in written form, messengers were also employed to read the text aloud, to convey the content of the letter orally. Phrases used in Sumerian letters offer hints as to the use of messengers to read the message aloud or even perhaps to explain points in the letter. As an example, an 'archival letter', i.e. "letters written between real people for everyday purposes of communication",⁷ is given below:

Say to Enlil-isa: give 360 litres of dates to Nur-Adad! It is urgent! Do not go against him!⁸

The phrase 'say to' signifies that the letter was to be read aloud to the recipient without being given to him physically. Thus it seems that the content of the letter was conveyed both in writing and orally. Nonetheless, many letters were also impressed with the cylinder seal of the sender, introducing another distinctive feature that facilitated communication without resorting only to the written or oral word, but through visual means (fig. 4).

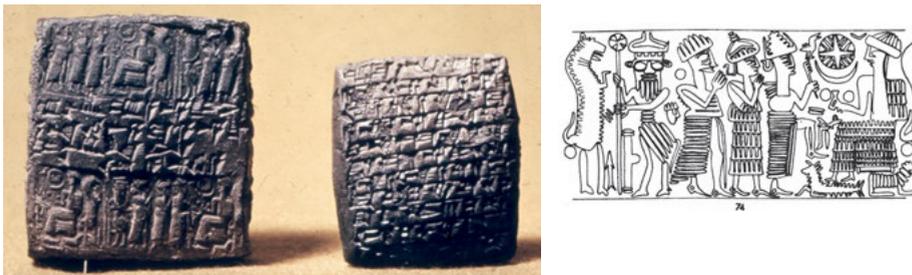


Fig. 4: Clay tablet with envelope of the Old Assyrian period from Kültepe (Kanesh); letter from Gnum-Aššur to three clients. The envelope carrying the letter was sealed eight times with the same seal, a drawing of which is to be found on the right. BM 113572a © Trustees of the British Museum. Drawing of composite seal taken from Garelli and Collon 1975, seal no 74.

The seal, which is a cylindrically shaped object usually made of stone, carrying a distinct design and sometimes an inscription providing information about its

⁶ Kienast/Volk 1995, Gir 19.

⁷ Huber Vuillet 2011, 487.

⁸ Michalowski 1993, no. 206, Ur III period, 2112–2004 BCE.

owner (fig. 5), is another important communicative apparatus of the ancient world. Impressed on a letter, it at once identified its sender.



Fig. 5: Greenstone cylinder seal and its modern impression (BM 89126) of Hash-Hamer, the governor of the city of Ishkun-Sin. It depicts the owner in a fringed robe, bald and clean-shaven, being led by a goddess towards the king, possibly Ur-Namma. Ur III period; possibly found at Babylon before 1840 © Trustees of the British Museum.

1.2 Schools (*e₂-dubba* = ‘tablet house’)

Another major vehicle for knowledge transfer and information flow was the school. In the scribal schools of Mesopotamia, students, usually of elite background, learned how to make clay tablets and styli, how to read and write, how to calculate and survey, and in some schools there was also music instruction. Life in these schools is described in many Sumerian literary compositions. An infamous description of the life of a schoolboy was published by Kramer in 1949:

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.⁹

There were different ways for the pupils to learn how to read and write. The curriculum included lexical lists, vocabularies, syllabaries and grammatical lists. Pupils also

⁹ Translation taken from Tinney 1998, after Kramer 1949, 205.

learned how to write letters and contracts by copying model letters and contracts.¹⁰ It was also very important for scribes to learn how to write royal inscriptions. The following literary letter from Aba-indasa to Shulgi Aba-indasa proves this:

Your servant thus says: “You are mighty: I will follow my king; of your word, I will be your messenger; standing on a boat, I will pull the oar; standing on land(?), I will... ; I am a scribe (and) I can write a stele.”¹¹

Another way of learning at schools was by copying royal inscriptions, royal hymns and other writings proclaiming the military prowess and political power of past and present rulers. On the left part of a Neo-Babylonian exercise tablet is a spelling exercise, while on the right part there is the beginning of the ‘birth legend of Sargon’,¹² a proclamation of the almighty power of Sargon of Agade and his humble beginnings:

Sargon, mighty king, king of Agade, am I.
 My mother was a high priestess, my father I knew not;
 My father’s brothers live in the mountains;
 My city is Azupiranu, situated on the banks of the Euphrates
 My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, in secret she bore me;
 She placed me in a basket of rushes, she sealed the lid with bitumen;
 She cast me into the river which did not rise over me;
 The river bore me up and carried me to Aqqi, the water-drawer.
 Aqqi, the water-drawer, lifted me out as he dipped his bucket;
 Aqqi, the water-drawer, adopted me, brought me up;
 Aqqi, the water-drawer, set me up as his gardener.
 As a gardener, Ishtar, loved me;
 For 55 years I ruled as king.

A quite uncommon Old Akkadian exercise tablet was excavated at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar), in the Diyala River valley. It narrates the great revolt against Naram-Sin, king of the Akkadian empire, and his triumph over the rebellious city-states. This tablet was found outside a private house in Eshnunna, possibly after being thrown away by the occupants of the house.¹³ Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it seems to be the exercise tablet of a pupil narrating a contemporary historical event.¹⁴ According to Foster,¹⁵ this exercise must have been a student’s copy of a genuine contemporary (royal) inscription. Irrespective of the transmission channels of this story, whether

¹⁰ Pearce 1995.

¹¹ Sjöberg 1975, 166.

¹² Lewis 1980.

¹³ This fragment (TA 31, 729) was found in the 1931/32 season at Tell Asmar (Delougaz et al. 1967, As. 31: T.729); the text was published by Gelb in 1952 and is known as MAD 1: 172.

¹⁴ Westenholz 1997, 223–229.

¹⁵ Foster 1990, 44 n. 14.

oral (the teacher narrating/dictating the story to the student) or written (copying the original inscription), the importance of learning about a contemporary historical event related to the almighty power of the king through copying or writing it, proves all the more that schooling acted as a propagandistic mechanism. Apprentice-scribes were acquainted with the royal word through the learning method of copying royal inscriptions/events and were thus indoctrinated while being educated.¹⁶

1.3 Visual Texts

Both letters and schools catered mostly for the literate population. The question thus arises: how was a large part of the population acquainted with the royal word? Two vehicles in which knowledge was carried, enabling an illiterate person to be included as a node, must have existed in early Mesopotamia: a visual and an oral one.

Imagery played a very important role in early Mesopotamia. Apart from aesthetics, imagery carried a narrative¹⁷ and could have been substituted for the written word. I will use the term visual text, or pictorial narrative as defined by Irene Winter. Visual texts contain action and are not only descriptive. They do not repeat nor illustrate a text, but they tell a story, which is also readable through their images. Sometimes text accompanies the image, providing more details of the narrative of the picture. But not all images required a text to be understood by their contemporaries; the monument and the imagery it carried alone could have equally told the story.

One such visual text is the famous Stela of the Vultures. Stelae were common in the third millennium, their main function being to denote the borders of fields, as boundary stones and as public commemorative monuments. The Stela of the Vultures was carved sometime during the reign of Eannatum, the city-governor and the ruler of Lagash, during the Early Dynastic period, around 2460 BCE. Six fragments were excavated by Ernest de Sarzec at Tello (ancient Girsu) in the 1880s, while a seventh appeared on the art market and was acquired by the British Museum in 1898. The stela has now been reconstructed from these seven fragments and is displayed in the Louvre. It is made of white limestone, and restored, it measures 180 cm in height and 130 cm in width; its weight should have been around 700 kg. It is carved in high, well-modeled relief on both obverse and reverse and is continually inscribed.

A lengthy inscription in Sumerian narrates the conflict between the city-states of Lagash and Umma over the common border, and records the victory won by Eannatum. The text is concerned with the historical context of the conflict, the dream oracle given to the king when he went to the temple for divine instruction, and the eventual triumph of the king of Lagash. It reads as a historical piece, although written most

¹⁶ Michalowski 1987.

¹⁷ Perkins 1957.

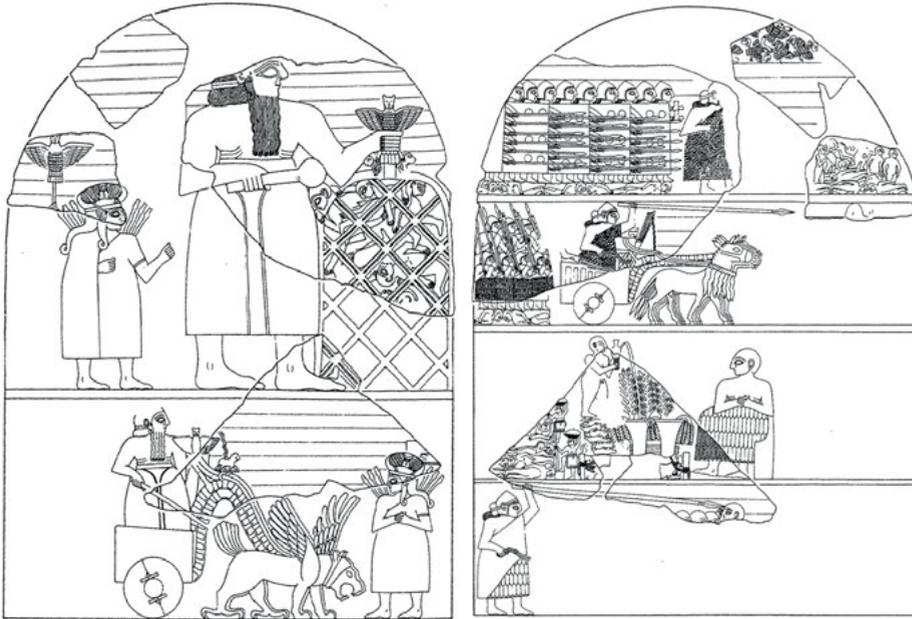


Fig. 6: Reconstructed drawing of both sides of the Stela of the Vultures; Tello, c. 2450 BC, Eannatum ruler of Lagash. Drawn by Elizabeth Simpson, taken from Winter 1985.

probably by contemporaries, at the request of the king of Lagash. The border dispute between Umma and Lagash is quite well known; both cities wanted to annex their neighbor's fields and often went to war. This stela represents one victorious 'settlement' of the land dispute, from the Lagashite ruler.

The image, on the other hand, narrates the current victory of Lagash over Umma. On the obverse, the so-called mythological side, 'the battle is over'.¹⁸ On the upper register Ningirsu, the patron-god of Lagash, entraps the enemies in a gigantic net and strikes them with his mace. The smaller figure behind Ningirsu is Ninursag, the Lady of the Mountain and mother of Ningirsu. On the lower register, Ninursag stands before Ningirsu, who rides on a chariot pulled by mythical animals. This side symbolizes the divine patronage and sacred nature of Eannatum's victory. The reverse side is comprised of four registers. It depicts battle scenes with Eannatum marching at the head of his troops, who advance in a phalanx, and the dead bodies of the Ummaites, the enemy on the right side. Vultures are flying above them, carrying the severed heads of enemy soldiers in their beaks. In the second register, the ruler is depicted in his chariot leading a victory parade. The third register depicts libation

¹⁸ Winter 1985.

rituals performed by a naked priest before the seated ruler. Small figures on the left side seem to construct piles of the enemies' corpses. The fourth register has not been preserved well enough to be reconstructed. This side visualizes the battle and the 'well-deserved' victory of Lagash over Umma.

This stela is an example of a monument both inscribed and illustrated, although the text and the image tell a different story. The imagery presents the present, whereas the text gives information about the history of the conflict. According to Winter,¹⁹ text and image complement each other but do not repeat each other. Both text and image had their own structure and function. The function of the visual narrative was different from that of the text, and it was presumably addressed to the wider public, emphasizing the divine intervention and will of Ningirsu in the decisive battle and triumph over Umma. In this case, the narrative nature of the stela aided communication with the public, emphasizing the divine patronage of the Lagashite ruler. Lau (forthcoming) has recently suggested that the obverse side of the stela must have been placed facing the border of Umma, with the Ummaites being the recipients of the mythological message, while the worldly side, the reverse, would have faced the Lagashites. This double-functioned communicative nature of a stela is intriguing and worth pursuing further in order to assess in detail the communicative facets of such vehicles.

1.4 Oral Means of Knowledge Transfer

Apart from visual and written texts, information was also transferred orally. Two speech mechanisms, a formal and an informal one, seem to exist in most state societies, and Mesopotamia can be no exception. Due to the nature of our evidence, which is mostly public records of social realities, we are more acquainted with the formal discursive mechanism in early Mesopotamia. This culminates in the function of the herald (*nigir*), a public official who was responsible for making public announcements on behalf of the administration, recruiting workers and soldiers.²⁰ We know, for example, that when a cylinder seal was lost, there was a public announcement; a herald blew his horn to announce to everyone in the city that all transactions verified by that seal should henceforth be considered obsolete:

A seal inscribed with the name of Ur-DUN, the merchant, was lost. In accordance with the word of the assembly, the herald has sounded the horn throughout all the streets: no one now has any claim against him.²¹

¹⁹ Winter 1985.

²⁰ Sassmannshausen 1995.

²¹ Steinkeller 1977, 48. This translation refers to a composite text edited from five different tablets. See especially Ali 1964 and Hallo 1975.

Other ‘public’ carriers of knowledge were the messengers. As discussed above, correspondents could have simultaneously employed a messenger and a written letter to convey information, and messengers were often sent to the rulers.

Speech act performance was also an important mechanism for the circulation of the royal word. Speech act performance could be the recitation of a royal or building inscription in front of an audience, probably by a priest responsible for the rituals surrounding the founding of a new temple. Prospective vehicles for such intentional and direct knowledge transfer could have been objects carrying a royal message but purposefully hidden from public and private view, thus ‘non-communicative’ objects. Hiding inscribed sets of objects, consisting of a brick-shaped stone tablet and a copper figurine, usually peg-shaped and symbolizing the king as a builder, beneath the foundations of temples was part of a tradition that stretches back to the beginnings of the third millennium in Mesopotamia. By the Ur III period (2112–2004), this practice was consolidated and the objects that were deposited in brick-boxes beneath the foundations of temples were standardized (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: On the left, foundation canephore figurine of Ur-Namma from Uruk; Ur III period; BM 113896 © Trustees of the British Museum; on the right, black steatite foundation tablet of Shulgi from the Nimintabba temple at Ur; Ur III period; BM 118560 © Trustees of the British Museum.

Both objects, the tablet and the figurine, were inscribed with a building inscription, naming the king who commissioned the building of the temple and the deity to whom the temple was dedicated. The fact that great care was taken in securing access to them raises questions as to their intended audience.²² Of course, they must have communicated their message to the gods, and to future rulers who searched for such objects as part of their restoration projects. But these objects were seemingly non-communicative for their contemporaries; it is nonetheless possible that these seemingly non-communicative objects transferred the royal word to the people.²³ Although we have no clear documentation that such a practice existed in the third millennium, we have a good basis for speculating that recitation of the text written on the building or foundation inscription took place in the rituals that surrounded the founding of a temple. We are acquainted with such ‘*public transcripts*’, as termed by Scott,²⁴ for example, in first-millennium Mesopotamia.²⁵ An interesting performance act, a “*state-sponsored theatre of cruelty and terror*”, a communicative stretching of the senses can be seen at the Royal Cemetery at Ur.²⁶

1.5 An Audience with the Ruler²⁷

A rather direct way for the royal word to be transmitted to the people was during an audience with the king himself. From the Royal Archives of Mari, in modern Syria, we are acquainted with plenty of audiences with the king, and plenty of angry messengers who were not received by the king:

...The day [I sent] this tablet of mine to [my lord], those messengers [kept shouting] in the gate of the palace, [and with] both hands [they] tore their clothes. [They] (said), ‘We came to (deliver) good words, so why can we not [], or else (why) can we not enter and meet with the king?...’²⁸

It is of course to be expected that royalty did not meet with most of the messengers carrying a letter or message.²⁹ But it seems that it was at least possible for individuals of high status to meet with the king directly. The audience halls in the palaces of Ebla, Mari, Tell Beydar, Kish and Eridu testify to the existence of special places for

²² See Tsouparopoulou 2014 and references therein.

²³ Liverani 1996.

²⁴ See Scott 1990.

²⁵ Ambos 2004, 50–52.

²⁶ Dickson 2006. One could add here the storytellers who conveyed myths and stories to a large illiterate audience. However the storytellers were not related directly to royalty, nor to the royal word.

²⁷ The author is preparing a dedicated article on this topic.

²⁸ Durand 1988, letter 370—translation: Heimpel 2003.

²⁹ Charpin 2008, 180.

meeting with the king, elaborate and impressive structures that aided the propagandistic nature of the meeting itself. In the Palace G at Ebla for example, an immense complex of courtyards, reception halls, private apartments, archives and storerooms has been unearthed, so far amounting to more than 4500 m² (fig. 8). The audience hall at the Royal Palace at Ebla was in actuality a wide open-air court, with four doors leading to focal points of the palace. The Ceremonial Staircase, leading from the



Fig. 8: Map of Royal Palace G at Ebla, taken from Matthiae 2013.

audience court to the living quarters in the north-east corner of the audience court, had steps inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The Monumental Stairway, the only entrance to the palace from the outside, had stone steps, while a door with thresholds of basalt and steps inlaid with mother-of-pearl led to the Administrative Quarter of the palace through the Throne Room and possibly the Treasury. Another door led to the Northern Quarter, which probably housed storerooms and offices related to the activities taking place in the Audience Court.³⁰

Visual representations, especially in the miniature arts, add to our knowledge about personal audiences with the king. Conspicuous is the design of many cylinder seals during the Ur III period, where the king is depicted as receiving his subjects. These designs are generally called presentation scenes, and come in different compositions, categorized according to the posture of the subject (presentee) and especially the placement of his/her hands. Such presentation scenes could be towards a deity or the king. Most high officials of the state in the Ur III period owned seals, however, which depicted them in a personal audience with the king. These are called audience scenes: the worshipper stands with his/her arms folded at the elbow and with hands clasped.³¹ Usually this type of scene showed the presentee standing alone before the king, but his/her personal goddess could also accompany him/her, as in the seal in fig. 9. These audience scenes are reserved for cylinder seals of high quality, both in the rendering of the inscription and the design, and belong to individuals of high standing in the society. This differentiation in the ownership of such seals indicates that although most officials would have been accepted by the king, only individuals of high status could stand before him as ‘equals’—if equality can be said to exist in this context.



Fig. 9: An audience with the king; composite sealing of the cylinder seal of Lugal-itida, a known high functionary of the Ur III state; taken from Tsouparopoulou forthcoming, Cat. No 201.

³⁰ Matthiae 2013.

³¹ Mayr & Owen 2005.

2 Indirect Knowledge Transfer

Information could have also passed from one person to another to be discussed among them, in a process of opinion sharing rather than opinion giving; an indirect or horizontal flow of information. The most common vehicle for this horizontal flow of information is gossip. Gossiping must have prevailed in the cities and markets of Mesopotamia. A nice account of this is given in a literary text:

At harvest time, your work does not match your appetite! You disappear from work, and they find you gossiping in the market place.³²

Due to the nature of the available documentation from Mesopotamia, it is difficult to assess gossiping and chattering as a form of mass communication. Based on later accounts, we could say that this form of mass or public communication might entail either an unintentional circulation of information, on the discussants' part, or a disguised strategy employed by elites to disseminate specific information, and thus the royal message, among the people. The scribes that inscribed these objects to be hidden forever in the foundations of the temples could have discussed the text they wrote with peers and/or family. The artisans that crafted them could have also discussed their content and message with their peers. Moreover, as discussed above, apprentice-scribes copied royal inscriptions in the schools. In this way the message of the ruling elite would have been passed on within a circular horizontal knowledge sharing.

3 Conclusions

In early Mesopotamia there were two ways for the royal word to be spread among the literate and the illiterate population: a direct way, involving written, oral and visual means and vehicles, and a horizontal, indirect way, mainly through word of mouth, through gossiping. The direct or vertical way involved correspondence, letters written, sealed and recited, schools where the main means of communication was through the written word, and personal audiences with the ruler; pertaining to the illiterate population were images, a royal propaganda mechanism, and oral carriers of information, such as the heralds, messengers, and speech-performers, reciting, for example royal inscriptions in the founding ceremonies of new temples. Equally important, however, must have been an indirect or horizontal method of transmitting knowledge, which was based on sharing rather than giving information. In this process, objects that appear non-communicative could have found a way to play a part in this information

³² After Civil 1963.

flow, mainly by word of mouth from one person to another. In this diffusion process there must have been several different stages; however we are not in a position to evaluate them. Hopefully this article will open up a new window for thinking about communication in ancient Mesopotamia that included not only the king and his elite entourage, but also the people from below, for whom most of this knowledge was destined. These people were not passive observers of history, but active participants in these knowledge transfer mechanisms; they were not spectators, but actors.

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