

Thomas E. Balke and Christina Tsouparopoulou

Introduction

This volume represents the results of the colloquium ‘Materiality of Writing in 3rd Millennium Mesopotamia’ which took place at the International Academic Forum Heidelberg on the 17th and 18th May 2013. The colloquium was organized in the context of the Collaborative Research Center 933 “Material Text Cultures – Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies” by the sub-project C01 “Materiality and Presence of Writing in the discourse of power in ancient Mesopotamia between 2500 and 1800 BC”. Scholars from various fields in Ancient Near Eastern Studies were invited to participate. The very intense and highly productive exchange which unfolded yielded the inspirational stimulus and synergy effect for the research fields Ancient Eastern Philology (Assyriology) and Near Eastern Archaeology in general as well as for the sub-project C01 in particular.

Prime object of the colloquium was to present the Ancient Mesopotamian research area, i.e. the cultural landscape embedded between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, in its entire material spectrum in the light of surviving cultural studies approaches for the immanent relevance of materiality and the presence of writing. The often-neglected yet essential relation between an inscribed artefact and its material character as well as the predominantly power-discursive content of the inscribed texts were prioritized.

The materiality of writing (as an act) and the materiality of text (as an artefact) lie at the focus of the Collaborative Research Center 933, which was established at Heidelberg University in 2011. Such a philosophical interest in the materiality of the written is not new,¹ although no one has studied it from a historical perspective. For example, Mesopotamian philosophical thought has been considered something of a void when related to later philosophical inquiries of the Greeks and Romans.² No modern-day scholar, apart from some contributions by Gebhard J. Selz,³ has touched upon the early Mesopotamian engagement with ontological considerations of materiality or of the relationships between humans and the material world, the prominence of text and the affordance of the written support, or even with the issue of ontology

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1 Foucault 1973.

2 Goody 2012. For a new intriguing approach to the epistemological subsystems of Mesopotamian thought see now van de Mieroop, 2015 who gives an encompassing overview about the intellectual history of the Ancient Near East. However, the authors have not had the chance of including it in this discussion.

3 E.g. Selz 2007.

in general. Henri Frankfort has dealt etically with theoretical issues of the Mesopotamian thought,⁴ and other scholars have dealt with the theoretical reflections, which are usually concealed in commentaries to various corpora of texts.⁵ On an epistemological level one can look at the engagement with the material world in ancient Mesopotamia on many different levels—from philosophy and mathematics (Selz; Damerow), to art history (Winter, Bahrani) and archaeology (Bernbeck; Pollock). The engagement of Mesopotamians with the material world is more evident in taxonomies, such as the Lexical Lists, with which they ordered their world by classifying, categorizing and hierarchizing objects, positions, and functions.⁶ The principles of classification underlying such lists, initially established for administration, formed the basis for the later Babylonian mathematics, religion, politics, literature and art. The equation of natural and social objects and phenomena was also prominent in their thought.

On the basis of Gumbrecht's *concept of presence (Präsenzbegriff)*,⁷ the principle of recognition of the prominence of a written text in combination with the specific affordance associated with inscribed media offers an entirely different starting point and enables one to approach the materiality of the written from a different perspective. This is why John M. Russell in his monograph describes the palace of the Assyrian emperor Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) with the following words:

Once upon a time, a long time ago, anyone fortunate—or unfortunate—enough to enter the palace of “the king of the world, king of Assyria” would have been surrounded by texts. In the first great Neo-Assyrian palace, the palace of Assurnasirpal II at Kalhu (Nimrud), texts were everywhere. The bull and lion colossi in the major door-ways carried texts. The pavement slabs in those doorways, and in every other doorway, carried texts. Every floor slab in every paved room carried a text. And each one of the hundreds of wall slabs, sculptured and plain, carried a text.⁸

In this specific case, text and its supports materialized the desire to mark royal ownership of the palace; architectural fittings were ‘converted’ into active royal monuments, and texts were seen as the visualization of kingship. Thus we see in this description and in the Neo-Assyrian palace itself a concept of text as a social product of a habitus, with which its producers as social agents negotiated access to power, and eventually their social, political and institutional environment. It is in this palace, in other text-supports, and even in the colours of the stones they chose to inscribe, related mostly to royal ideology and power proclamation/propaganda, that we can find traces of the preoccupation of Mesopotamians with materiality.

⁴ Frankfort 1949; see also Wengrow 1999 and Taylor 2011.

⁵ Lambert 1960; Alster 2005; Frahm 2011.

⁶ Englund/Nissen 1993.

⁷ Gumbrecht 2012.

⁸ Russel 1999, 1.

The contributions incorporated into the volume at hand deal with and trace such and similar developments addressing the large number of writing artefacts witnessed in Mesopotamia since the beginning of the third millennium BC: from seals to the clay tablet in its unique presence and its exceptional material nature and materiality, from alabaster gypsum, basalt, and slate to clay (silt). This takes place within a time frame which ranges from the earliest administrative tools, the calculi (“tokens”) at the end of the 4th millennium BC, the first clearly classifiable law monuments in stone, the corpus of archaic texts from the Early Dynastic I–II period and the lexical texts from Ebla in northern Syria (24th century BC) up to the 2nd millennium BC, namely the early days of the Great Hittite Empire (16th century BC). Special emphasis is placed on (raw) materials used for inscribing tokens as well as identifiable evolutionary changes arising in the course of the evolution of writing in the early days of Mesopotamia, e.g. from the initial exclusive use of clay towards an increasing use of more durable stone—especially darker, more luminescent varieties of stone—as a writing surface. Such an approach is of crucial importance with regard to the extremely large corpus of about 110,000 texts, for it offers the possibility to reject the usual practice of reconstructing one single composite text from a multitude of divergent manuscripts from various temporal and spatial origins. This represents a fundamental reorientation and, as a result, a turning away from the hermeneutical practices prevalent in Ancient Near Eastern Philology for more than a hundred years.

In this connection, the studies gathered in this volume focus on very different groups of writing media with equally divergent materials and/or forms or formats. They attempt to use and apply the textual and anthropological approaches of materiality and presence of writing⁹ to interpret and analyse ancient Mesopotamian artefacts from different perspectives and within most diverse historical contexts. Subsequently, the individual contributions appear in a principally thematic order starting with an article on the precursors of (cuneiform) writing, the calculi (Sauer and Sürenhagen), followed by articles focusing on particular artefacts and/or text groups (Andersson, Balke, Marchesi, Müller-Klieser), others examine inscribed artefacts linked to specific sites or archives and place their palaeographic peculiarities within an overall context of archaeological and philological examinations on the early periods of Mesopotamian history (Lecompte, Evans, Paoletti) or deal with cuneiform writing on metal and their unique presence from a historiographical point of view (Wilhelmi). As a completion of the volume, three essays—provocatively in parts—point out new approaches to existing concepts of materiality (Lau, Tsouparopoulou, Pollock).

In their article, **Kristina Sauer** (Heidelberg) and **Dietrich Sürenhagen** (Constance) deal with the function and the administrative importance of those very calculi

⁹ Hilgert 2010; Meier/Ott/Sauer 2015.

(“tokens”) and counters as well as hollow clay balls and numerical-ideographic clay tablets, which represent a common feature of the early Sumerian material culture of the 4th millennium BC. Those writing and supra-regional administrative tools mark the beginning of a development, which resulted in the institution of writing in ancient Mesopotamia. Sauer and Sürenhagen trace this “information storage”, detectable throughout the entire Near East from Southern Babylonia, North-Western Syria, South-Eastern Anatolia to Khuzestan (Iran) and question its specific role in the formation and development of the earliest writing system witnessed only in Southern Babylonian Uruk as well as its underlying language. Moreover, they put the connections of those objects made of unfired clay, the hollow clay ball with enclosed counters and the pillow-shaped numerical clay tablets or pointed oval seals into the focus of their investigations. They also examine the extent to which common features between tokens and the earliest witnessed ideograms can be proven scientifically or be linked to scratch symbols from Uruk with archaic character shapes. Based on such comparisons, it may be possible to gain a better scientific approach to iconographic visual imagery of archaic sealings as well as to the supra-regional symbolic language of these tokens.

The article of **Jakob Andersson** (Uppsala) deals with dedicatory objects known from Mesopotamia in the period between 2800 BC and 2200 BC donated by private individuals and deposited in sanctuaries. Andersson gives an overview of objects used as votive offerings or dedicatory objects, such as mace-heads, seals, statues, stelae, vases and dedicatory plaques. To this end, he examines not only the specific text-formulae used in “private” inscriptions and their vocabulary (e.g. a-ru “consecrate” vs. sa₁₂-rig, “donate”) by delimiting them from dedicatory inscriptions authored by rulers, but also the donors mentioned therein, their social background and the beneficiaries of the donation. Andersson also addresses the artistic production of such dedicatory objects and focuses on important aspects such as finishing processes or the reuse of inscribed artefacts and their associated accessibility. An aspect specifically significant for ancient Mesopotamia, namely to assign proper names barely distinguishable from personal names to specific dedicatory objects, is also incorporated into his discussion. Furthermore, the article in question pursues possible motivations for private dedications to divinities, primarily taking into account the extension of one’s own life or the life of other family members, but apparently the strengthening of family structures plays a major role as well.

Thomas E. Balke (Heidelberg) deals with the relation between material, text and the associated iconography in the oldest Mesopotamian legal documents or records of purchase of fields witnessed since the Early Dynastic I period (approx. 2900–2700 BC), the so-called “Ancient Kudurrus”. Balke pays particular attention to three singular stone artefacts which have as common feature specific figurative scenes referring to the content of the inscription: (a) the so-called “Blau’s monument”, a composite

artefact consisting of a half-oval plate and an obelisk-like stone, (b) the “Figure aux Plumes” made of limestone and inscribed on both sides, and (c) the stele of Usumgal made of alabaster plaster. Balke focuses on the deliberate choice of the material used, i.e. the stone variety with its specific colour and hardness and its possible relation to the inscription. Having the presence of those archaic legal documents in mind, he also examines the significance embedded iconographically in the symbolic accompanying activity, such as stepping over a wooden masher or horizontally hammering a nail into a wall. Finally, he turns to the outer shape of those artefacts: in the background of Lakoff’s principle of materiality of mental images¹⁰ the two “Blau’s Monuments” as a composite artefact seem to suggest a link between the archaic forms of the cuneiform characters BA “allocate” and KU/DAB₅ “grab, i.e. acquire the payment”. This peculiarity could also be taken as evidence of poor writing and reading skills of the respective addressee.

In his article, **Gianni Marchesi** (Bologna) follows the traces of an especially prestigious group of artefacts, the conical chlorite vessels of the so-called “Intercultural style”, whose figurative depictions—two entwined snakes fighting—often cover the entire surface of the vessel. Although spread throughout the Middle East, from the Euphrates in Mesopotamia over Uzbekistan up to the Indus valley, their workshops were located in the Iranian Kerman province, the ancient Marhashi. The author focuses on a small group of ten vessels found in Mesopotamia proper which bear, in contrast to the large mass, a short inscription in the Sumerian or Akkadian language added secondarily. Marchesi also explores the possible religious functions those dedicatory inscriptions served after their arrival in Mesopotamia and the extent to which potential arrangements of the artefacts as well as their materialization were influenced by that.

In her comprehensive study **Julia Müller-Klieser** (Heidelberg) addresses the so-called eyestones known in Mesopotamia since the 3rd millennium BC, i.e. small jewellery stones grinded into the shape of an eye, primarily made of banded stone (e.g. agate, onyx). She explores the question what particular function can be accredited to these stones, be it inscribed or uninscribed. In doing so, she reflects upon the comparisons between eyestones and dedicatory pearls and focuses on the dispersion of inscribed or uninscribed exemplars of each group. Based on these artefacts, the author examines the specific relation of (dedicatory) inscriptions and (decorative) writing surfaces, whereby a personal value attached to the jewellery stone might result primarily from the combination of an imported exotic stone as a material and only secondarily from the dedicatory inscription applied in individual cases. In the course of her overview, Müller-Klieser also focuses on various aspects of stone as a material, e.g. liter-

¹⁰ Lakoff 1987.

ary testimonies such as the Sumerian epic Lugal-e, the symbolic meanings of specific stone types and, on a cross-cultural level, on the universal concept of look and vision as well as—in a negative sense—the evil eye.

Camille Lecompte (Paris) examines a corpus of approx. 400 archaic cuneiform tablets excavated in the area of the royal cemetery of Ur. They comprise the most important archive of business texts from the Early Dynastic I–II periods (approx. 2900–2600 BC) and exhibit with regard to their formal and textual structure as well as the names of persons listed therein—although insufficiently comprehensible due to numerous haplogogies—obvious echoes to later text corpora from the 3rd millennium BC. Lecompte concentrates on material aspects of clay tablets as a writing surface, such as outer shape, circumference and general physical appearance. Besides, he addresses the inner structure of text inscribed thereon, i.e. the specific arrangement in the form of columns and separating lines as well as the separation of content-related sequences of characters in individual divisions. Above all, the author examines the extent to which these texts, regarding the structure of the text or the arrangement of meaningful cuneiform characters, already show signs of a random character arrangement as usual in the late Uruk period (approx. 3100–2900 BC) or common structural features with younger texts of the Fara period (approx. 2500 BC).

In her contribution **Jean M. Evans** (Munich/Chicago) focuses on the excavation campaigns carried out co-jointly by the University of Chicago and the American Schools of Oriental Research in the area of the Inana temple in ancient Nippur (today commonly referred to as Niffar or Nuffar) in the period from 1953 to 1962. The excavations at the temple precinct of the goddess Inana with approximately 20 stratigraphically successive settlement levels, revealed the longest ever continuously used site in ancient Mesopotamia. In the course of the forthcoming publication of the excavation results, the author focuses on a specific group of inscribed dedicatory objects found in the temple area, e.g. foundation nails and door plaques of the Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BC). In doing so, Evans explores the question to what extent an apparent absence of writing artefacts in older levels than the VIII is related to the aspect of visibility or “presence” of an object, e.g. in cases of an inscription on the inner side of a vessel generally invisible to the donor. She also puts the important aspect of a secondary use of those dedicatory artefacts, i.e. exceeding their pure use as a building material, taking into account the continuousness of inscription and inscribed object against the background of the existing numerous drill holes in the necks of anthropomorphic statues indicating such a secondary use.

Paola Paoletti (Munich) examines a corpus of lexical texts found in the palace G (24th century BC) in the ancient city of Ebla in northern Syria, a genre of text which has its antecedents in ancient Mesopotamia, as proved by findings in Uruk (approx. 3000 BC), Fara (approx. 2500 BC) and Tell Abu Salabikh (approx. 2600 BC). The total

of around 15,000 excavated texts in Ebla in 1975–1976 constitutes, together with the corpus of ancient Akkadian texts, the earliest known adaptation of cuneiform to a language different than the Sumerian one, while primarily serving as an inventory of signs for learning cuneiform and as a dictionary of the Sumerian language. Based on different ducti, she focuses on distinct palaeographic phases (phase I–II) within the Ebla archive and illustrates her analysis with careful palaeographic observations of specific character shapes of cuneiform used in Ebla, e.g. the common cuneiform characters KA and DU or BĀHAR and EDIN. Paoletti also explores how individual wedges may differ and assigns those divergences to different palaeographic stages of development, leading to basic observations on tablet formats used in the Ebla archive for the genre of the so-called school texts as well as on the standing of writers within the “object-actor”-network these were part of.

While most of the previous articles had their thematic focus in the Mesopotamian Early Dynastic time horizon (approx. 2900–2340 BC), the article of **Lisa Wilhelmi** (Heidelberg) is set in a different timeframe. Wilhelmi focuses on the so-called Anitta-text (CTH1) written in the old Hittite language, the most important text of the Old Hittite era (17th–16th century BC), having recourse to historical events before the Hittite rule in the Central Anatolian city of Hattusa (modern Bogazköy). The text tells the story of the conquest of the city of Kanesh (modern Kültepe) by a certain Pithana, king of Kussara, before covering the acquisitions of his son Anitta in detail. In her analysis, Wilhelmi focuses on the one hand on the text’s history of reception, from which two later copies from the 14th and 13th century BC became public; on the other she explores the ways the text could have become “present” in the archives of Hattusa after a break of multiple generations in historical tradition. Structural peculiarities of the Hittite Anitta-text suggest a genesis or compilation of originally three different textual sources, including a royal inscription on a stone tablet attached to the palace gate of Kanesh. Another issue Wilhelmi discusses is the obvious interest of later Hittite kings on the later Anatolian or northern Syrian history reflected in the reception of the text. She also takes into consideration that the absence of written sources from the period before Hattusili I (approx. 1650 BC) can be attributed less to an actual lack of relevant sources, but rather to the relocation of the capital to Hattusa along with the entire administration.

The final contributions of the volume approach the subject matter from a rather different perspective by focusing on the respective theoretical applicability of concepts of materiality and question the absolute character of conventional research approaches.

For that reason **Daniel Lau** (Berlin) centres his paper on possible applications of the communication theory of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann in Near Eastern Archaeology. Based on the figurative portrayal of the so-called “Stele of the Vultures” of King E’anatum of Lagas (approx. 2400 BC), Lau attempts to examine and evaluate Luh-

mann's Communications model, which is based on the core actants "alter" (= transmitter) and "ego" (= receiver), as a possible alternative method for artefact and text analysis in the field of Near Eastern Archaeology. The author examines the extent to which the "Stele of the Vultures" in its capacity as a significant image and writing medium can be equally seen as an artefact legitimizing sovereignty and as a communication medium in terms of power whose respective textual and iconographic components should be related specifically to the prevailing political situation in southern Mesopotamia.

Christina Tsouparopoulou (Heidelberg) discusses the obvious modern dominance of a mainly textualist approach to the written culture in ancient Mesopotamia, an approach which sees all text-products and the very act of writing as equally sacred. In the course of her article, the author focuses on the materiality of two categories of inscribed artefacts well witnessed in Mesopotamia, attempting a reinterpretation of the conventionally text-specific view of Mesopotamian written artefacts. In particular, this includes inscribed and unscribed foundation objects as well as royal brick inscriptions "defiled" by dogs. Tsouparopoulou also refers to similar examples from the Middle Ages which prove that inscription and text media are not a self-contained entity per se, but a social network on which "random" prints or marks of non-textual nature can have an altering effect as to the meaning of these artefacts. The importance of an artefact is thus not only gained and conveyed by a prominent inscription and its use as an information medium, but also by further object-immanent attributes.

Susan Pollock (Berlin) focuses on applying an anthropologically defined concept of materiality for the early stages of the evolution of writing in ancient Mesopotamia and the objects/artefacts used as writing media. The author explores the extent to which the interaction between a human actor and a material object dependent on each other can be proven significant in the cultural development of Mesopotamia. In doing so, she focuses on a noticeable change attributed to an extension of materials used for textualisation—from clay as primary material to stone—, for example with regard to the material-related knowledge and the cross-craft interactions between the artisans and craftspeople involved (seal cutters and scribes). Pollock also analyses how a change of the chosen writing medium—from a medium like clay rather limited in its durability and permanence to an extremely permanent and durable one like stone—might on the one hand affect the genre of inscribed texts and on the other bring about a change in presence (Präsenz) of the script-bearing artefact. Due to this the author also reflects on the crucial aspect of active vs. passive literacy of cuneiform among the population. In these premises, it is entirely conceivable that in the case of the seal as a visual and textual medium due to its wide-ranging circulation, its legends could be read and understood by a large proportion of the population.

This volume brings together scholars from different schools of thought, who consider the materiality of the written from distinct angles. Hereby they successfully contribute to a better understanding of Mesopotamian's earliest material and textual culture and its specific implications on other fields of research.

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