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Deconstructing Textuality, Reconstructing Materiality

This paper addresses the modern dominance of a textualist approach to the inscribed material culture of Mesopotamia, which perceives all things written as highly valuable and the very act of writing as sacred, fetishizing in this process the product of writing, the text. Two case studies with a focus on the material dimension of inscribed artefacts will be briefly examined aiming at proposing an alternative to and deconstructing this textualist view: two categories of objects bearing so-called ‘royal inscriptions’—inscriptions written/dictated/sponsored by royalty, that is 1) inscribed and uninscribed foundation deposits, i.e. objects deposited and deliberately hidden in the foundations of temples, and 2) clay bricks used in the construction of royal and sacred architecture, carrying royal inscriptions and ‘defiled’ by dogs. With a short comparative example taken from the Medieval era, this paper will discuss how the carrier of text is not a monolithic entity but a social agent, marked with non-textual imprints that introduce notions of value and meaning, arising from its materiality. I am attempting to deconstruct the text:artefact divide by looking at the value the ancients themselves could have ascribed to written objects and ask: if they did not ‘venerate’ text then, why should we ‘venerate’ it now?

Indeed there are two different methods one can assess the material dimensions and materiality of inscribed artefacts. Archaeologists working with and especially excavating inscribed specimens have long advocated for the proper documentation of inscribed artefacts in a similar vein to all other archaeological artefacts: contextualized.¹ This is definitely a first step in understanding the nuances of written artefacts as lived social objects; and this is indeed the first step in applying a holistic and integrated approach to the material culture of the Ancient Near East and to understanding

This article emerged from the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Center 933 “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies”. The CRC 933 is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). This article went through a radical ‘post-modernist’ peer-review. An earlier version was uploaded on academia.edu and tens of colleagues commented on it through an academia.edu session. I would first like to thank Augusta McMahon for her comments on an earlier than the one uploaded on academia.edu draft. Moreover, I would like to thank G. Selz, G. Zólyomi, H. Vogel, D. Stein, B. Schneider, G. Benati, S. Gordin, J. Andersson, R. Hinckley, L. Pearce, E. Olijdam, J. Taylor, D. Katz, Th. E. Balke, A. Payne, A. Joffe, F. del Bravo, K. Duistermaat, P. M. Tommasino, C. Sulzbach, A. di Ludovico, A. Garcia-Ventura, who all shared their opinion, comments, objections on the text. Even though I have not followed all comments, I greatly acknowledge here the help I received from so numerous colleagues to enhance my arguments and ameliorate the content. All errors and misconstructions of course remain mine.

1 See especially Zettler 1996 and Gibson 1972.

the past. In this paper I am suggesting another approach, perhaps a second step, to understanding the materiality of inscribed artefacts. I should emphasize that in doing so I do not believe we have successfully practiced this holistic approach advocated up to now into the past materials. But nowadays excavations in the Ancient Near East are limited and there are plenty of objects awaiting their study in museums around the world, excavated in the past, which this approach I am proposing here would help us to better evaluate them in their totality.

A different approach, closely related to the one I am proposing here is so-called ‘diplomats’, which entails the meticulous study of the minutiae of inscribed objects. Diplomats offers perspectives into the ‘materials-profiling’ of texts and inscribed objects in general.² What I am trying to do here however is to offer perspectives into the ‘materialitäts-profiling’ of texts,³ i.e. related to their use, social life and agency.

I start with discussing notions about the sanctity and value of Mesopotamian text from our own perspective, presenting a few examples, which show its veneration from modern people, scholars and ‘commoners’. The aim is to desacralize text. It probably seems unorthodox to suggest that text is sacred and one can desacralize it. According to the Oxford Dictionary ‘desacralize’ means to ‘remove the religious or sacred status or significance from’, and in this case I aim to remove the sacred significance of text-carriers. Even though almost never openly proclaimed, scholars still treat text as being sacred, diminishing the value of its material support. The perception of text as sacred is everywhere in our works, seemingly a modern understanding when parsing written records, be it a clay tablet, a statue, a plaque. We believe that the inscription made the object and not the other way round, sacralising in this process the text of the inscription. But even if we do not openly venerate it, we certainly give to the inscription incontestable value. Following Michalowski, who stated: “It is one thing to state banalities about ‘the other’, or about the inapplicability of western concepts to non-western modes of thought; it is something quite different actually to step outside one’s frame of reference and attempt a proper analysis”,⁴ my aim here is to step outside our frame of reference and understand what text meant for the objects’ users.

Only by understanding that inscribed objects are part of the same material culture as un-inscribed objects, would we be in a position to fully comprehend the past. This paper attempts thus to take out the supernatural aura carried by media with writing and bring back into the focus their material substance, their materiality and agency.

² Charpin 2010; Postgate 2014.

³ Focken et al. 2015.

⁴ Michalowski 1999, 72.

1 Value of Text-bearing Objects

The two ‘objects’ discussed below are quite different from each other in terms of material, function, use and social lives. The bricks were made of clay, a mundane and easily acquired material in Mesopotamia, and were structurally essential besides having commemorative and communicative function. The foundation deposits are of more ‘exotic’ materials, stone and copper, both of which required a network of trade to function for the acquisition of their materials and a greater degree of specialization for their crafting. They had social lives, commemorative and symbolic use. Each one of these objects seems to have had a different kind of value: the bricks had an economic and when inscribed a communicative value; the foundation deposits an economic, communicative and symbolic one.

Value can have many different connotations and meanings. An object can have an economic value in the likes of Marx’s theory, or a symbolic value. But the communicative value of the text itself should not be overestimated. Thus, in texts and their carriers it is thought and rightly so that meaning is ‘prescribed in advance of social action’, and that ‘an inscribed object announces itself’, and makes its message apparent on its own right. Thus, inscribed objects are ‘by definition marked out as socially powerful, as valuables’, apart from them being the prime information-givers.⁵

It is also interesting to look at the value ascribed to an object from a conservator’s point of view. Elizabeth Pye discussed the inherent value of an object and its assigned value when it bears writing. She distinguishes three levels at which one can measure the relation between text and material: 1) the object is only functional as long as it provides information through its writing, for example a newspaper; 2) the material of the object is equally important, for example prize cups where both the material and the dedicatory inscription are important; and 3) objects on which writing does not affect their function, but is secondary and adds information on quality or source, for example the potters’ marks or the shelf marks on books. However, she adds that “in practice, because of its evidential value, the presence (or assumed presence), of any form of writing will almost always take priority over other factors during preliminary investigation, and when making conservation decisions”.⁶ Thus, it is evident that the moment writing is suspected, the object that bears text, irrespective of the function of the latter, is assigned a different value and thus treated differently.

This perception of an inscribed object’s value has also prevailed in the scholarly lore of Assyriologists, historians and archaeologists. This is especially true for research in third millennium BC Mesopotamia, broadly within the realm of historical archaeologies that privilege texts over artefacts and eventually making the divide text:artefact more prominent. Scholars working on third millennium (and collectors

⁵ Marshall 2008, 64.

⁶ Pye 2013, 321–322.

alike) seem to value an inscribed object higher than its uninscribed counterpart and a clean sanitized text higher than a ‘spoilt’ one. Therefore, the questions that I will try to answer in this paper are: does a similar uninscribed object have less value? By similar I mean objects that show the same degree of craftsmanship, made of the same material, and used for evidently the same purpose, with specimens existing both inscribed and uninscribed. Does an inscribed artefact that has been ‘marred’ under random circumstances contemporary with its use, lose its meaning and value? Or should we try to find a deeper meaning in its ‘destruction’, a meaning that is appreciable to modern symbolic orders?

2 Sanctity of Text

That text and writing are sacred is not a new idea; already in 1726 Daniel Defoe introduced his beliefs on the origins of writing as being ascribed to the gods. According to him, God composed the first text in the history of humanity once he wrote the Ten Commandments on the two stone tablets of Mount Sinai.⁷ Of course his theory is not supported anymore; there seems nonetheless to be an inherent need to associate writing and text with the supernatural.

Moving to Mesopotamia, Laurie Pearce⁸ emphasized the sacred character of text, and the inherent sanctity of the process of writing. Following Smith⁹ who writing on the Greek Magical Papyri equated the process of writing with the enactment of a ritual, Pearce goes on to suggest that: “[...] The act of writing is understood to contain sacred meaning in and of itself and that the integration of the mundane and the supernatural is manifest through the production of text.” Her argument is based on two cases: first that in some colophons to literary and scientific texts, scribes used statements of purpose employing vocabulary from votive inscriptions, such as “for his long life, well being and hearing of his prayers”. Her second example comes from Seleucid legal and scientific texts from Uruk and Babylon, which have the phrase “According to the command of Anu and Antu, may [this endeavor] be successful”, added. This phrase with no connection to the content of the tablet, according to Pearce expressed the hope of the scribe that his writing would please the gods.

While it is certainly true that first millennium scholars equated writing and signs to the heaven and the stars, and spoke of heavenly writing,¹⁰ in both examples used by Pearce I argue that these phrases, in the colophons or as superscript, expressed the

⁷ Dafoe 1726.

⁸ Pearce 2004.

⁹ Smith 1995.

¹⁰ For heavenly writing (šīṭir šamê) see Rochberg 2004. For its origins into the third millennium, see now Selz 2014.

scribe's hopes and a great deal of individuality in rendering the text. These examples do not have the depth of the contributions of other first millennium scholars who compared the act of writing with creation and the beginning.

Indeed, writing in Mesopotamia was thought to have been gifted by gods to man.¹¹ Writing was also in some ways deliberately esoteric and restricted.¹² But would that infer that the objects on which signs were inscribed were themselves sacred? Scribes never wrote that texts were inherently sacred; the gods could have protected their texts and writing, but these texts were not actually venerated. However, the notion of the inherent sanctity of text or of the process of writing is omnipresent in most modern scholarly works but never explicitly stated.

3 Modern Veneration of Text

Starting from Leo Oppenheim, who wrote:

[...] The texts on clay tablets are far more valuable, far more relevant, than the monuments that have been discovered, although the latter, especially the famous reliefs on the walls of Assyrian palaces and the countless products of glyptic art, offer welcome illustration to the wealth of factual information contained on clay tablets, stelae, and votive offerings [...]¹³

the idea of the importance of text over and above all other material manifestations, is still held. David Wengrow, in an article on materiality and power, used as an example an anecdote from Woolley's diary on the awe that filled him while unearthing a brick with a royal message, just because of the text on the object. Wengrow went on to link text with the power legitimization of a ruler for its contemporary and future audience. In the same article, using as a case study the foundation inscriptions of the Mesopotamian rulers he considered the striking role inscriptions held in this discourse and emphasized that they should not be overlooked. He argued for the interplay between writing, material and social agency, exemplifying the act per se of writing. According

¹¹ Nisaba for example was a goddess of agriculture and writing, protector of scribes who was succeeded in the first millennium by Nabu. The fact that a goddess of agriculture is also related to writing could possibly signify the close relationship of administration with the beginnings of writing. For the view that writing emerged within administrative settings and was not related to the supernatural, see among others Nissen/Damerow/Englund 1993. I would like to thank Helga Vogel for suggesting the link of administration to the creation of writing as a different approach on the written within the scholarly community.

¹² For more on secret knowledge, see Beaulieu 1992 and Lenzi 2008.

¹³ Oppenheim 1964, 10.

to him an inscribed object exerts a unique and intense relation with the agent and thus it is ascribed value from its function as an inscribed object.¹⁴

Laurie Pearce in an article on materiality and texts attempted to show that writing played an important part in the legitimization of power especially towards the divine realm.¹⁵ She suggested that even the placing of an inscribed tablet within the foundation deposits with the inscribed part facing up consolidates the value of texts for a direct reading of its content by a deity. She advocates that together with the inherent prestige value of the deposited materials, the concerted effort to display the inscriptions even in this inaccessible place emphasizes the value of the text itself in the foundation deposits. However, this contradicts with instances of inscribed bricks and foundation tablets found at Adab with the inscribed side placed facing down.¹⁶ For example, Ur III bricks at Adab with the inscribed part placed downwards have been found. In the ED foundation deposit of Einigmipae at Adab, the stone tablet was placed inscription facing up but the copper alloy tablet's inscribed part was facing down.¹⁷ Pearce went further explaining the absence of text on some foundation tablets: 'anepigraphic tablets symbolically conveyed a written message'. But then why ever inscribe a text on them = if a written message could be symbolically conveyed?

I do not wish to distance myself from the excitement one gets when unearthing an inscribed object. It is indeed true that there is an inherent satisfaction when a text-bearing object is brought to light. First it adds extra information about the function of the object, and could possibly be of historical value. For those who can read it, it will definitely add a significant piece to the puzzle. But this satisfaction, academic curiosity and natural excitement have all influenced the perception of the modern 'locals' when standing next to an inscribed object. The following passage shows a somewhat biased view on the beliefs locals kept about inscribed objects in the 1900s when illiteracy was high in the region:

Near the south-east edge of the platform was an ancient doorway to some chamber, but all that remained of it were two blocks of pink stone, upon which a white-stone door-socket rested. In a hollow in the socket the wooden post revolved. The socket was carefully formed and polished, but if it bore an inscription it had been worn away. One day I found a workman industriously chipping the stone away, and when I asked him why he was doing it, he replied that he was seeking for money. It is the general belief among the Arabs that every inscribed or engraved stone conceals the wealth of the ancients [...]¹⁸

¹⁴ Wengrow 2005.

¹⁵ Pearce 2010.

¹⁶ I would like to thank Jakob Andersson for bringing these cases to my attention.

¹⁷ Wilson 2012, 79 and 93.

¹⁸ Banks 1912, 247. This passage possibly shows a western view, entwined with colonialist underpinnings of Banks.

Similarly—or not—the inscribed door socket of Manishtushu was secondarily used by local women. Al-Rawi and Black wrote:

[...] barren women were in the habit of anointing the stone in the hope of conceiving (doubtless unaware of its ancient connection with a goddess associated with childbirth).¹⁹

Whether Manishtusu door-socket's secondary use was related to the presence of an inscription on the object, to its antiquity or some other properties is difficult to say. These two cases above however show that large stone objects were highly regarded in the region during the recent past. Whether this was due to the writing they bore remains a point for discussion. I would however lean towards the view that writing did add a certain aura to the objects in question.

My point in this discussion is to argue that using the available material, we could deconstruct the notion that the inscription only gave more value to an object, or that an inscribed object was considered sacred or valuable in itself. For this I move on to the two case-studies.

3.1 Inscribed and Uninscribed Foundation Deposits

Ritually burying foundation deposits during the construction and/or renovation of a new temple is well attested in Mesopotamia. Standardized accumulations of objects were usually placed beneath the foundations of buildings, at seemingly structurally significant points, such as below entrances, corners, and wall intersections. In the Ur III period, in monumental buildings, they were always deposited in a receptacle, more commonly in a brick box (fig. 1).

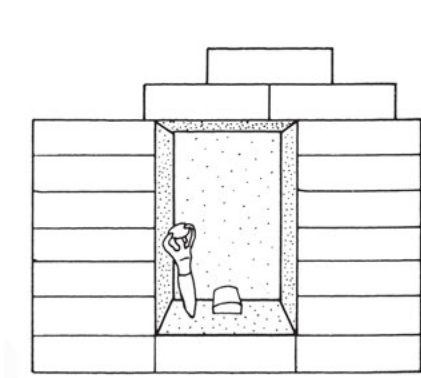


Fig. 1: Drawing of an Ur III foundation box (taken from Ellis 1968).

¹⁹ Al-Rawi/Black 1993, 147.

Ur III foundation deposits have been found at Ur, Nippur, Uruk, Girsu and Susa. They consisted of a copper canephore figure and a plano-convex brick made of stone (usually steatite or limestone); sometimes other objects were also present, such as beads and stone chips (fig. 2a). Wooden fragments have also been found, and in some cases they seemed to be figurines similar to the copper ones. The copper figurine was wrapped in cloth and measured approximately 30 cm in height (fig. 2b).²⁰ The stone tablets, which were shaped like plano-convex bricks, measured around 10x5 cm. The sets, that is the figurine and the tablet, were usually inscribed with a building inscription, recording the name of the king and the building project in a formulaic manner, but they could also be uninscribed.²¹

There has not been a satisfactory answer as to why some sets in these foundation deposits were uninscribed. To briefly summarize, at Ur foundation boxes were found in three loci: an empty box at the Temple of Nanna, three boxes at the Ehursag all with uninscribed figurines and stone tablets, and five deposits of Shulgi at the Temple of Nimin-tabba, with only one of the sets on the uppermost corner uninscribed.²² Woolley changed his mind twice about why the foundation deposits of the Ehursag were uninscribed, ranging from being a building dedicated to many deities to being a building of public character and not a temple. Ellis likewise did not give a definitive answer. The fact that all seven foundation boxes and deposits from the Inana temple at Nippur were also uninscribed did not aid in understanding the practice of not inscribing them.²³

Before discussing the importance or not of text, I will first discuss possible differences seen in the rendering and manufacture of inscribed and uninscribed foundation deposits. My aim is to see whether there was any qualitative difference between the two. I start with the uninscribed foundation stone tablets. I would like to stress here that I have been unable to trace the uninscribed foundation tablets from Ur. Even though most objects in Woolley's publications are listed in a concordance of the excavation number with the museum number they were sent to, for these uninscribed tablets only one such record exists. Moreover, even though there is a description and photograph of one of the uninscribed foundation figurines from the Ehursag, no photograph is available for the uninscribed tablets. Should we insert here a caveat for bias towards uninscribed tablets? In the main text of the publication,²⁴ Woolley gives the excavation number of one of the sets of uninscribed foundation deposits, but not for the other,²⁵ while in the catalogue only the inscribed foundation tablet from the

20 See the discussion of Garcia-Ventura (2008; 2012) on clothed foundation figurines.

21 Ellis 1968.

22 For the foundation deposits at Ur see Woolley 1926, 1939 and 1974 as well as Zettler 1986 and Ellis 1968, 63–64.

23 For the foundation deposits at Nippur see Haines 1956, Haines 1958 and Zettler 1992.

24 Woolley 1974.

25 “In the south corner [...] Inside it there stood a copper foundation-figure of the king carrying a

Nimin-tabba temple is recorded completely, with excavation number, reference to similar foundation deposits and its museum number.²⁶



Fig. 2: a. Foundation figurine and stone tablet from Nippur © Chicago, The Oriental Institute Museum; b. on the right foundation figurine covered with textile from Nippur (taken from Rashid 1983, Taf. C 136).



Fig. 3: a-b. Two sides of an uninscribed foundation stone tablet from the temple of Inana at Nippur, housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ht. 2.5 x Le. 9.7 x Wi. 6 cm © New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; c. Uninscribed foundation stone tablet from the temple of Inana at Nippur, housed in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto; Ht. 3.9 x Le. 9 x Wi. 6.5 cm © Toronto, The Royal Ontario Museum.

basket (U. 1000, pl. 47a) which had been wrapped in linen, and at its feet was a steatite tablet (U. 1001); neither was inscribed. A similar box with similar (uninscribed) figure and tablet was found in the mud-brick foundations of the east corner.” Woolley 1974, 36.

26 “*U.6157 Tablet, black steatite, inscribed with the dedication by Dungi of the Dim-tab-ba temple. UET I, No. 59. Found in situ in a foundation-box below the wall of the temple. See U.6300, 6302, 6304. p. 40, Pl. 48a. (L.BM.118560)”. Woolley 1974, catalogue.

The situation is not comparable with the Nippur excavations: photographs of anepigraphic foundation tablets from Nippur are indeed available.²⁷ Both anepigraphic tablets come from the Inana temple at Nippur. The one in figures 3a and 3b is now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the records of the Museum it says that this is a model of a brick made from bituminous limestone. The one shown in figure 3c is housed in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and the records of the museum mention it as “Dedicatory stone from foundation deposit of the temple of Inanna (uninscribed)”.

These two uninscribed foundation tablets seem to have been equally well executed as their inscribed counterparts. Both inscribed and uninscribed tablets resemble the plano-convex bricks used in earlier periods in the construction of buildings, by having a depression on their convex side, in imitation of the so-called thumb impression. We can compare here the uninscribed ones to an inscribed limestone one housed at the Morgan Library, which is inscribed with a dedication of Ur-Namma, for when he built the temple of Enlil (fig. 4a). Both tablets bear the same depression on their reverse uninscribed side, both seem to have been polished at their ends and both are quite symmetrical.



Fig. 4: Inscribed foundation tablets. a. From Ur Le. 12.4 x Wi. 8.3 cm (MLC 2629) © New York, The Morgan Library & Museum; b. From the temple of Nimin-taba at Ur (B16217) © University of Pennsylvania Museum; c. From the temple of Nimin-taba at Ur (BM 118560) © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Their differences are only slight: first, the inscribed ones had also their surface polished after they were inscribed, making them appear gleaming and lustrous. This could also be attributed post-excavation; it is relatively difficult to ascertain the sequence.²⁸ Second, they are differentiated in size. The inscribed ones are quite longer

²⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Clemens Reichel for providing me with photographs of the uninscribed foundation tablet from the temple of Inana at Nippur, housed now in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

²⁸ I would like to thank Jonathan Taylor for pointing this out. Indeed, from the British Museum's

than the uninscribed ones (fig. 3). Nonetheless, it should be mentioned here that all tablets from Susa as well as some stray—and not properly excavated tablets—from Uruk seem to have been quite small, measuring roughly 7x4 cm with a height of 1 cm.

The stones used were equally the same. Limestone and steatite prevailed for both inscribed and uninscribed tablets. It seems that the stones were selected with the same eye to light and dark contrasts as in the inscribed specimens. Thus, we can say that both inscribed and uninscribed stone tablets were carefully and equally executed irrespective of whether they had text incised on their surfaces.

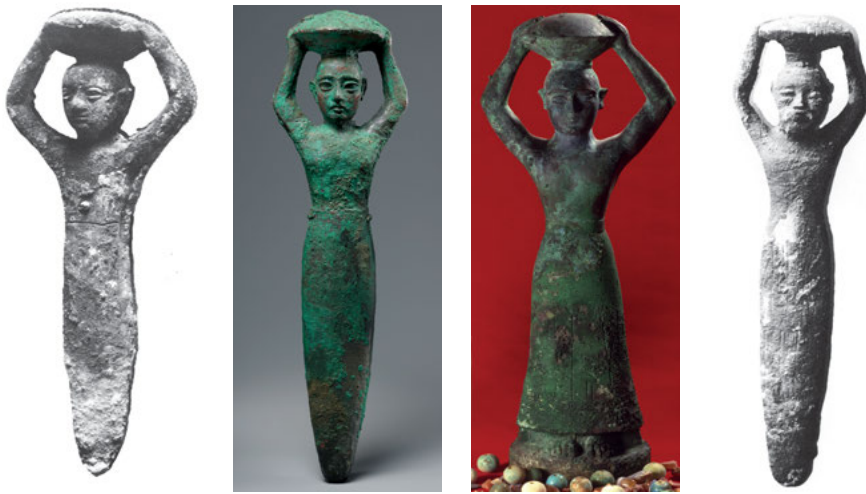


Fig. 5: Foundation figurines, inscribed and uninscribed. a. From the Ehursag at Ur (taken from Woolley 1974, pl. 47a); b. From the Inana temple at Nippur © New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; c. From the Ekur at Nippur © Chicago, The Oriental Institute Museum; d. from the Nimin-tabā temple at Ur (taken from Woolley 1974, pl. 47c).

On the other hand, because of the artistic nature and value of the foundation figurines²⁹ it has been easier to find information and photographs of uninscribed ones. As is evident from the photographs in figure 5, the uninscribed figurines are similarly crafted when compared to the inscribed ones and all are of equal quality. The best example probably comes from Nippur where at the Ekur the figurines were inscribed while at the Inana temple they were not. The rendering of both sets is unambiguously the best seen so far from an Ur III foundation deposit (taking into consideration

documentation, we can see that some of these foundation tablets (as well as door sockets) were treated after acquisition by the museum: sometimes the signs were filled in with this white substance. It is thus not difficult to see a similar treatment, such as polishing, to have taken place at the museum.

29 On the shining properties of metal, and the aesthetic value of radiance, see Winter 1994.

the fineness of casting, the naturalism of the pose and their proportions) irrespective of whether they were inscribed or not. Moreover, and more importantly, the metal alloy analysis of these figurines shows that in the Ur III period, starting from Gudea onwards, all figurines, irrespective of whether they were inscribed or not were pure copper, about 99% of copper.³⁰ So in all respects inscribed and uninscribed foundation figurines were equally executed.

3.2 Bricks

And now I would like to bring to our attention our thoughts over the importance of text. What do we think of when we see an inscribed brick? Are we awestruck like Woolley was in the 1920s? Why did Woolley stand short when he encountered an inscribed brick? Was it really the inscription that left him lost for words; was it the notion of the inscription or the content of the inscription? Would he have experienced similar sentiments had he found an uninscribed set of objects? Would a person, of the likes of the workers of Nabonidus, when they conducted archaeologically oriented digs to find the foundations of temples of former grandeur, stand still when they would encounter an inscribed object? Or would they experience the same awe had they found a tabula rasa with the shape of a plano-convex brick? Of course we get excited that an inscribed brick might help us in the identification of the structure we are excavating. But do we categorize it as a royal and building inscription, as an object that bears a royal inscription only in our texts or also in our structuring visualization of Mesopotamian life? Are we royalists or populists? And when we see a brick carrying a royal message on which a dog has randomly stepped while the brick was drying (fig. 8) what do we think? Was the inscription so meaningful and powerful to the past viewer as it was to Woolley?

Bricks have a long history of manufacture in Mesopotamia. Made of clay, they were fired, air-dried, decorated, glazed, stamped with an inscription or incised. They were integral to the construction of buildings, and seem to have been of standardized sizes. The fact that bricks were used in abstract mathematical calculations³¹ supports the notion that they must have been a widely known unit within Mesopotamian thinking, comparable to nowadays kilo.

³⁰ Hauptmann/Pernicka 2004; Muscarella 1988.

³¹ Robson 1999.



Fig. 6: The images here show the production of bricks in molds by Syrian laborers preparing to build a 1982 addition to the excavation house of the German mission to Tell Bi'a near Raqqa (courtesy K. Englund).

Bricks used in the construction of temples all over Mesopotamia and Iran seem to have random imprints left by domestic and wild animals roaming around the areas these bricks were left out to dry (figs. 7–8). Examples can be found at Chogha Zanbil, where there are even bricks with human footprints (fig. 7b), said by some archaeologists to belong to children and in the Ziggurat of Chogha Zanbil bricks occur with animal paw prints. In Assur, at the entrance to a house dated to the seventh century there is a brick on the floor with an imprint of an animal (fig. 7c). From Ur as well comes a brick with a footprint possibly of a child (fig. 7a).



Fig. 7: Bricks with human and animal footprints. a. From Ur (UM 84-26-123); b. From Chogha Zanbil (courtesy U. Bürger); c. From Assur (courtesy P. Miglus).

But how common would such impressions have been on bricks thought today to symbolize the materialization of a ruler's power: on inscribed bricks bearing a so-called royal inscription? Inscribed bricks are considered to bear a royal/monumental inscription, just because they carry on them a text prescribed by the ruler/king and mentioning him and usually the god/goddess to whom the temple/building was dedicated. They are included in the royal inscriptions and carry an air of importance just because they are considered the bearers of a royal message. But to the eyes of the

laborers, the people and whole communities who manufactured them, what did they symbolize? Were they perceived as manifestations of power, or were they just thought of as some more building materials? Indeed such royal/building inscriptions were equally ‘defiled’ by dogs. Two such examples come from Ur bearing an inscription of Ur-Nammu for when he built the house of Nanna,³² and along a dog’s paw prints (fig. 8), possibly of middle size, weighing around 15–20 kg.³³



Fig. 8: Bricks with royal inscriptions and paw prints from Ur. a. BM 137495; b. BM 90014
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

The answer that one would intuitively give to the question raised above is that all people participating in the construction of a temple stood in awe in front of the grandeur of the work of the ruler. And this was supposed to be the purpose of such enormous constructions when 7,000,000 bricks would be needed to build one ziggurat.³⁴ To understand the grandiosity of a ziggurat’s construction, it would be important to stress Campbell’s calculations for the ziggurat at Babylon: the Ziggurat had 36,000,000 bricks (1/10 of which fired); 7,200 working days would have been required for the production of the fired bricks, and 21,600 for the rest. Thus, Campbell calculated that only for the bricks (production and laying) 1,500 workers would have been needed.³⁵ This enormous construction and production, both in labor and materials, should have appeased the ruler and enhanced his power. Even if in the building

³² Frayne, *RIME* 3/2.1.1.2, ex. 18, and *RIME* 3/2.1.1.33.4.

³³ Englund 2014, Bricks 9 (2014-02-20) from cdi tablet.

³⁴ David Oates calculated that only for the outer wall of the so-called ‘Palace of Naram-Sin’ at Tell Brak, 810,000 bricks would have been required for its construction, while the straw for its mortar and bricks would equal more than 13sq m of cultivation (Oates 1990, 390). Heimpel 2009 calculated that in the Ur III period, brick production equaled about 240 bricks per worker per day.

³⁵ Campbell 2003, 33.

inscriptions those people (the laborers) were just more anonymous agents, there is a prevailing image of those anonymous agents as standing amazed in front of the power of the ruler and the gods. But also the fact that some of those objects were inscribed should have given them a different prestige.

However in reality it seems that those people most probably did not spend too much time considering such implications, as can also be seen in the Shulgi's mausoleum's area at Ur, where the builders stacked bricks which were left over from the building of the mausoleum and instead of being removed, they were left there against the face of an old wall, some 400 bricks in total, eventually buried beneath accumulated rubbish (fig. 9). How the area of a royal building could be so disfigured by piles of discarded building materials, if the builders were so much awed by its grandeur? And if a dog stepped on a brick these builders had just stamped with the royal message, they would not be bothered twice. They would still use it.



Fig. 9: Piles of bricks left over from the building of Shulgi's mausoleum (taken from Woolley 1974, pl. 2b).

Moving forward to the 15th century, two scribes, far apart from each other, found their manuscripts marred by cats. One of them in 1445 found his neatly written manuscript imprinted by a cat's paws that not only stepped on it but also first passed through the ink, thus leaving its unwanted marks for posterity (fig. 10a).

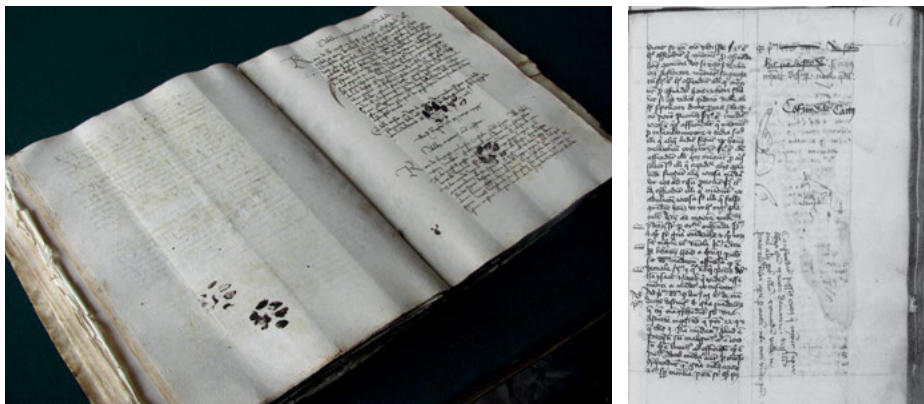


Fig. 10: a. Cat paws in a fifteenth-century manuscript (photo taken at the Dubrovnik archives by @Emir Filipovic);³⁶ b. *Confundatur pessimus cattus* © Cologne, Historisches Archiv, G. B. quarto, 249, fol. 68r.

Another scribe in the Dutch city of Deventer must have been even more annoyed finding his manuscript to have had feline urine stains (fig. 10b). This one was more imaginative, and leaving the rest of the page empty, drew a picture of a cat and cursed it:

Hic non defectus est, sed cattus minxit desuper nocte quadam. Confundatur pessimus cattus qui minxit super librum istum in nocte Daventrie, et consimiliter omnes alii propter illum. Et cavendum valde ne permittantur libri aperti per noctem ubi cattie venire possunt.

[Here is nothing missing, but a cat urinated on this during a certain night. Cursed be the pesty cat that urinated over this book during the night in Deventer and because of it many others [other cats] too. And beware well not to leave open books at night where cats can come.]³⁷

3.3 Discussion

In this paper I have used two different case studies from the material text culture of Mesopotamia to discuss the importance of text and how the divide of artefact:text should be deconstructed.

In both inscribable objects from the foundation deposits, the stone tablet/brick-model and the copper figurine, the inscribing process represents only the final stage

³⁶ Taken from <http://medievalfragments.wordpress.com/2013/02/22/paws-peeand-mice-cats-among-medieval-manuscripts/> (last accessed: 22.06.2016).

³⁷ Porck 2013.

in their manufacture. The inscription alone does not add much more to the value of the object since the materials used required a preliminary involvement of labor or are the result of trade, two characteristics that gave them a basic economic value. The intrinsic value of both objects was high enough. Writing did not add to the intrinsic economic value of an item, but it added significance in terms of context and could thus have been left out. This exclusion did not in any way diminish the value and meaning of the foundation deposit. Value was most importantly acquired from the material and the labor required having these objects made.³⁸ What I am discussing here is the possibility to take into consideration the intrinsic value of the objects in question. Taking the pluralistic view of Moore³⁹ when discussing intrinsic value, I will take it that the objects discussed above can be considered entities, which have value ‘as such’, ‘in themselves’. Thus, looking at the materiality of text-carriers it seems possible to suggest that neither the text nor the text-supports (material) were venerated. Both were valued and sometimes the material itself carried much intrinsic value but not sanctity.

My second example, the bricks stamped with the royal message and dogs’ paws, show that text did not need be detached from daily life, and that the audience of the text would not be offended if a dog roaming around stepped on one of the bricks carrying a royal message. The sacred character of both a building and an object was not contaminated by everyday life.

Using these two examples, I show that both the degree to which value is made intrinsic to an object, and the way it is performatively enacted in lived social action are critical to the kind of agency it will exercise. Value was not created only through inscription, though it was more prominently stated, but other features as well gave to the artefact its social life and agency.

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³⁸ Irene Winter’s work on the redefinition of value in Mesopotamian objects’ chaîne-opératoire is indispensable for anyone working with artefacts and their ‘value’, the agency of the material and the agency of the object (Winter 1994, 1995, 2003, 2007).

³⁹ Moore 1903.

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