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Archaeology and Texts in the Ancient Near East

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From its infancy as a discipline, archaeology in the Middle East has been intimately tied to the written record. Inscriptions were among the first artifacts from Mesopotamia and Iran brought to the attention of early modern Europe by travelers, whose interests were inspired in the first place by a text¹ *par excellence* – the Bible. When excavations were initiated in Mesopotamia in the 1840s and 1850s, they produced a flood of tablets and monumental inscriptions that facilitated the decipherment of Akkadian and led to the identification of additional hitherto unknown languages and cultures such as Elamite, Urartian, Hurrian, and Sumerian.² When George Smith announced the discovery of a Mesopotamian flood story in 1873 (Lloyd 1980:146) many saw cuneiform as a window on the most remote periods of the past, if not on the origins of humanity itself. Although this illusion was gradually undermined by advances in geology and evolutionary biology, finding tablets remained one of the primary objectives of archaeology in the ancient Orient.

The extent to which this was a priority is revealed in a controversy that took place in the late 1880s among the planners of America's first overseas field project in the Middle East, the University of Pennsylvania's Nippur expedition. Its epigrapher and later director, Hermann Hilprecht, contended that it would be more efficient to purchase tablets from local diggers than to deal with the logistics and supervision of excavation directly (Kucklick 1996:49). While this policy was not enacted, the fact that it was even considered shows the extent to which the archaeology of southern Mesopotamia was a tablet hunt, with sites like Telloh and Nippur mined for their lode of new epigraphic material. Emphasis on recovering artifacts that could speak for themselves in writing was not unreasonable in an era when the potential of archaeology for establishing chronological sequences, defining contexts, and attacking questions of historical interest through mute material remains had yet to be realized.

The methods that eventually gave archaeology legitimacy as a discipline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were developed, for the most part, in other areas,

but there are a few specifically associated with the Middle East. W. M. Flinders Petrie is remembered in introductory archaeology textbooks today as the creator of an ingenious system of sequence dating for pre-Dynastic Egypt. During a brief sojourn in Palestine, he also first recognized the potential of using pottery and exhibited an appreciation for the stratigraphy of tells for cross-dating and chronological coordination (Moorey 1991:28–29). The arrival of German excavators at Zincirli, Babylon, Assur, and Uruk, with their emphasis on broad horizontal exposures and recovery of architectural remains, did much to foster an appreciation for context that could give voice to artifactual information in its own right (Lloyd 1980:174).

Once effective methods for investigating prehistory were developed, the Middle East assumed a pivotal role in the study of the human past for reasons such as the origins of agriculture and the emergence of state-organized complex societies, that had little to do with the inscriptions its archaeologists continued to uncover. Nevertheless, the Middle East remains an arena of exceptional interchange and feedback between philological and archaeological research. Writing itself is an archaeological concern here. The first fully developed system of recording language graphically, cuneiform, can be traced back to its origins in less sophisticated recording devices through the findings of archaeologists in the tells of southern Mesopotamia (Gelb 1963:61–72). The alphabet was also an invention of the ancient Orient, and its evolution from a local experiment in the early second millennium to the inspiration for Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan, and Latin scripts of the first millennium B.C.E. is manifest in small inscribed artifacts of modest philological content.

It is not just the historical priority of writing or the unparalleled time depth of the record that makes it a concern to the archaeologist: a key point is that an extraordinary proportion of the written record for the Middle East has been extracted from the soil, and thus has an archaeological context. Most of the writing germane to Mesopotamia, Assyria, the Hittites, pre-Achaemenid Iran, etc. does not come from external observations or information transmitted from generation to generation as does, for example, the historical documentation for the emergence of Rome or the early dynastic history of China. It is instead reconstructed from materials largely composed in the time and culture to which they are relevant and recovered as physical objects.

Less direct means of historical transmission between the ancient Near East and the present are not inconsequential, but there have been significant disruptions. Discontinuity is bridged only imperfectly by accounts of such writers as Herodotus, Ctesias, Xenophon, Berossos, and Strabo. The Bible constitutes an exception, obviously, but it is a late and parochial collection of documents in comparison to the corpus of cuneiform materials in various languages (see Finkelstein, this volume).³ On the other hand, an unrivaled volume of written material survives thanks to the durability of the primary media of literacy in the ancient Near East, clay tablets and stone monuments. A good part of what comes out of the ground is quite mundane: lists of commodities like sheep or beer rations, receipts, private correspondence, tablets on which a scribe in training jotted a few signs, etc. The

information these documents transmit is of a different character than what is available to ancient historians who work only with documents that were intended for posterity, and opens windows onto aspects of daily life that would be hidden to us had they been written on perishable materials like parchment, wood, or papyrus. These make it possible to write "history from below," to use the phrase of one modern practitioner (Van de Mieroop 1999).

This is not to deny that a very real historical tradition existed within the ancient Near East or to claim that *all* written documents are contemporary with the periods on which they shed light. Some texts report on events long in the past and others fraudulently purport to be earlier compositions than they actually are. As early as the end of the third millennium B.C.E., scribes were actively incorporating local dynastic lists into a master framework for the history of southern Mesopotamia (Jacobsen 1939:128–164). The Assyrian King List presents a chain of succession that spans nearly 1,500 years (Pritchard 1969:564–566). Among the Hittites, to cite a particularly prominent case, older tablets were frequently recopied by scribes and classic texts originally composed several centuries earlier were found in several copies in the royal archives at Boğazköy (Bryce 1998:420). In royal chancelleries and temple communities throughout the Near East, professionals maintained a stream of religious and literary continuity as well as propagating texts for the audience of posterity. This included documents in Sumerian, which, like Latin, was maintained as a written language centuries after it ceased to be spoken.

The interplay of epigraphy, archaeology, and ancient concepts of tradition is clearly illustrated by Nabonidus of Babylon (555–539 B.C.E.), who excavated sequences of temple foundations, linked them with previous rulers on the basis of inscriptions, and performed restorations of buildings and monuments to legitimize his own imperial policies (Beaulieu 1989:138–148). One of the subjects of Nabonidus's antiquarian interests, Hammurabi, also presents an interesting case of a textually documented individual leaving a strong imprint in the archaeological record. He is best known for his law code, which survives as a diorite stele in the Louvre, and has been replicated in many modern casts, providing the first text that many contemporary students encounter in learning Akkadian. The original was recovered in 19th-century C.E. excavations at Susa, where it had been brought as an item of booty by the Elamites in the 12th century B.C.E. The tradition of these laws was sufficiently independent of the original monument that at least one copy of them is attested in a tablet inventory of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Fales and Postgate 1992:69). Hammurabi's numerous surviving letters show him to be an administrator for whom almost no matter was too trivial (e.g., Kraus 1968:passim). His destruction of the palace of Mari, one of the richest sites in the Near East, speaks for the effectiveness of his armies and left behind a trove of tablets that enlighten us on many aspects of the politics and society of his age. Thus the career of one individual has left its imprint on the archaeological record in several different ways, from the mundane to the monumental, and in historical traditions fostered by ancient libraries and modern cultural institutions.

With these mutual dependencies, one would expect philology and archaeology to be thoroughly integrated, yet there is a tension between the fields that leads prac-

tioners of both to lament that the potential integration has not been fully realized (Liverani 1999). One factor that has complicated the exchange of information between textual and archaeological sources is the division between archaeology and epigraphy as academic specialities (Van de Mieroop 1999:5). Training in ancient languages such as Akkadian, Hittite, and Sumerian, is demanding, but not greatly in demand. It is only offered at a few elite institutions and most Assyriologists – as cuneiform specialists are called in deference to the original source of cuneiform tablets, whether or not they have any interest in Assyria proper – generally devote their efforts to the interpretation of tablets themselves. Although there are rare individuals who have shown equal capacities in philology and archaeology, and certainly some cross-training between the disciplines, most analysis of texts is done by people who are not actually concerned with the contextual recovery of artifacts. There is also apt to be a somewhat different conception of audience for the products of the research in the two specialties. Philology is, by its very nature, culturally specific and particularistic, often focusing on unique creations and individual behavior. Archaeologists, on the other hand, usually attempt to understand human behavior in the aggregate (Childe 1956:13–15), and may move from culture to culture during their careers, or even in the course of a single stratigraphic excavation. Such factors often lead to breakdowns in communication and a failure of both disciplines to exploit the potential offered by actually finding written documents in the ground. I shall return to this point after a discussion of the character of the written record.

Writing Systems of the Ancient Near East

Mechanisms for recording linguistic information graphically have a longer history in the Middle East than anywhere else in the world, but it is important to recognize that writing is very unevenly represented in both time and space. Some systems are in fact quite defective in recording clear links to language, functioning more as mnemonic devices for limited types of information than fully developed mechanisms capable of transmitting any and all thought. While it may be technically correct to speak of literacy beginning five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia, this starting point is not as dramatic a boundary as is, for example, the divide between prehistoric and historical archaeology in North America. For long stretches of time after the invention of cuneiform the archaeologist must work without the benefit of documentary evidence, which is often silent on some of the most essential aspects of even relatively “literate” societies, including the large proportion of the population that made no use of writing whatever.⁴

The cuneiform system originated in southern Mesopotamia in the late fourth millennium B.C.E., where the earliest tablets, found in level IV of the Eanna district of Uruk, appear to be purely numeric (Nissen et al. 1993:13–14). It has been suggested that the system of notation may have been developed to replace a system of tokens or tallies that were sealed in tangerine- or orange-sized clay envelopes, or bullae, in the years preceding its introduction, but the thesis that the first signs were

originally pictorial representations of "complex tokens" (Schmandt-Besserat 1992: vol. 1, 142–150) remains unsubstantiated. There can be little doubt, however, that the primary emphasis in early recording was keeping track of commodities. Nearly simultaneously with Uruk's development of the precursors of the sign forms that were to remain in use in the following millennia, another script, also making use of clay as the basic medium but having a slightly different inventory of signs, appeared in the neighboring Susiana Plain, undoubtedly stimulated by the same social needs that generated writing in Mesopotamia. Despite some continuity with later writing, this "Proto-Elamite" script remains undeciphered (Walker 1987:41; Damerow and Englund 1989).

The primary historical value of fourth-millennium writing is in the light it sheds on bureaucratic procedures in the earliest state-organized societies. Linguistically, it is not particularly informative. Only Uruk has produced a substantial corpus of documents, and in these there is almost no grammar or phonological information. Most of the texts are "economic" or "administrative" in that they are simple tags, records of quantities of commodities, or cryptic notes of transactions. A few "lexical" lists seem to have served as exercises devoted to scribal training (Nissen et al. 1993:19–24). There are a large number of signs and different counting systems in evidence. What language lay behind the writing is uncertain.⁵

Tablets and inscribed stone objects dating to the following centuries have been found at several sites in southern Iraq and Syria. General continuity with the script of the Uruk period is clear, but there are also significant changes. The signs, initially pictorial, develop more abstract forms and are now wedges made with a triangular stylus rather than drawings, although many numbers continue to be made by impressions of an instrument (presumably the opposite end of the stylus) with a circular rather than triangular cross section. A significant development is the standardization of signs and a great reduction in their number from over 1,000 to approximately 600 basic forms. The writing became increasingly phonetic, with many signs being used for their syllabic value rather than standing for whole words (Nissen et al. 1993:116–124).

Mesopotamia appears to have been multilingual well before it was literate, with place names and certain technical terms indicating the erstwhile presence of non-Semitic, non-Sumerian speaking groups. With the rise of Sargon and his dynasty to power in the twenty-fourth century, cuneiform came to be used for recording the Akkadian language, but even earlier Sumerian tablets found at Tell Abu Salabikh appear to have been written by scribes with names that are etymologically Akkadian (Biggs 1967). Before it disappeared in the first century C.E. (Walker 1987:17–18), the logo-syllabic cuneiform system spread throughout the Near East and was also used to write Eblaite, Elamite, Hittite, Hattic, Hurrian, Luwian, Palaic, and Urartian.⁶ Two additional scripts, Ugaritic and Old Persian, invented independently in the second and first millennia B.C.E., respectively, are sometimes called "cuneiform," although they operate on quite different principles. Their characters are indeed wedge-shaped, but in each case they are restricted in number to around thirty and function essentially as defective syllabaries (consonant with vowel unspecified) or consonantal alphabets (Walker 1987:44–47).

The Semitic alphabet, ancestral to our own, also emerged in the Middle East. Its history is much more difficult to trace than the development of cuneiform because it was normally written on perishable materials and comparatively few documents survive. The first attempts at alphabetic writing are generally thought to have come about through the interaction of Semitic speaking peoples of the Levant with Egypt around the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. (Healey 1990:16–19). The gradual evolution of the characters can be traced from the second millennium Levant to the Phoenician alphabet in the early Iron Age and thence via Greece, Etruria, and Rome, to their form on the present page. Vowels, it should be noted, were not added to this writing system until it reached Greece (Healey 1990:35–39).

In the Iron Age, variations of the alphabetic script were used to record a number of related languages such as Hebrew, Moabite, and Aramaic. Sealings, ostraka, papyri, and a few royal display inscriptions present evidence for these in some quantity. Ultimately, Aramaic was the linguistic survivor, and the Hebrew Bible the most substantial text in the ancient Near Eastern alphabetic tradition. By the end of the first millennium B.C.E., these scripts were in competition with Greek and Latin, but their prevalence is demonstrated by such documents as the Dead Sea Scrolls and their subsequent replacement by Arabic was never total.

One other quite distinctive script was developed in ancient western Asia, although its importance pales in comparison to cuneiform and the Semitic alphabets. In the Hittite Empire, various symbols first seen on sealings were elaborated to create a logo-syllabic hieroglyphic writing system. It is now recognized that the language conveyed by these “Hittite hieroglyphs,” whenever there is sufficient indication of phonology to judge, is not Hittite at all, but rather Luwian, its cousin in the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European family. When Hittite and Luwian ceased to be written in cuneiform with the demise of the Hittite Empire around 1200 B.C.E., this hieroglyphic script came into widespread use in successor principalities of southern Anatolia and northern Syria. Artifactually, it survives largely in the form of royal display inscriptions, although the existence of a small number of private letters on lead strips suggests that it had wider uses (Hawkins 1986).

Texts as Artifacts

Although there is some justification for the belief that Mesopotamian civilization was at times unusually bureaucratic and literate, there can be no doubt that taphonomic factors are primarily responsible for the wealth of mundane documentation available for study. The cuneiform system was designed for clay, virtually the only thing available to write on in southern Mesopotamia. Although most tablets were merely sun dried, they still survive extraordinarily well in normal archaeological deposits such as trash dumps and on floors of abandoned houses. Archaeologists in other areas, for example the Aegean, despair of finding clay tablets in contexts where there has not been a conflagration to at least partially fire them (Chadwick 1976:18), but this is not a necessary condition for survival in the Middle East. They

endure even in damp soils, and I have personally observed unbaked tablet fragments and seal impressions retain their legibility and decoration after having been inadvertently washed in a flotation machine. In southern Mesopotamia excavated tablets are sometimes shattered by crystals of salt that form in the clay as they dry out, and of course any tablet that lies unprotected on a site's surface for any length of time will weather away, but otherwise, once buried, they have a high survival rate.

Tablets could be baked, of course, and this was done primarily to documents for which some sort of permanence was expected. Some of the most spectacular examples of the latter are the clay prisms on which the annals of Assyrian kings were recorded, recovered in the early days of excavation. Formal sealed treaties, literary texts, and other archival documents were treated in this way, but archaeological recovery of these, particularly in modern excavations, is far less common than unbaked tablets. Perhaps the most common class of durable inscribed object is the baked brick, which is often stamped with a short text giving the name of a king and the structure for which the brick was created.

The contexts in which tablets are found are quite varied. In some celebrated cases, it is quite appropriate to speak of the recovery of archives or libraries. The first of these to be discovered, and still probably the most important, was Assurbanipal's Library at Nineveh, a collection made by the last great king of Assyria (Oppenheim 1977:15–18). There are inventories that suggest that an important part of the material assembled was not on tablets, but on writing boards, which unfortunately do not survive (Parpola 1983:4–8). There is also testimony pertinent to the original sources of the tablets in the form of letters indicating the king's interest in collecting tablets (Oppenheim 1977:244). The majority of texts from the Hittite capital also come from imperial archives, of which there was one in the royal palace on the citadel of Büyükkale and another in the principal temple of the city below. The discovery of a completely unexpected major archive was made in 1975 at Tell Mardikh, Syria, where tablets of the third-millennium kingdom of Ebla lay in rows as they had been shelved in an annex at the side of a palace courtyard.

Many sites produce massive numbers of tablets that were not in any way intended for posterity. There are indeed palace archives at Ugarit, but excavation there has produced thousands of additional tablets in various contexts, especially in the level that marks the destruction of the site at the end of the Bronze Age (Pedersén 1998:68–80). One group of letters, reportedly found in kilns, reflects exchanges between the king of Ugarit and other potentates reporting on the approach of the enemies who apparently destroyed the site. A similar situation is seen at the palace of Mari, where the soldiers of Hammurabi, who destroyed it, left documents in the ruins that inform us of the politics of the period immediately preceding the destruction, as well as all other aspects of palace life. These destructions, which were no doubt catastrophes for those who lived at the time, tend to produce masses of evidence of a single time and place, upon each of which generations of Assyriologists have been able to build their research careers.

One may contrast these epigraphic extravaganzas with the more prosaic forms of archaeological recovery in which tablets are found in smaller numbers in contexts less likely to reflect their use than their discard. The site of Nippur in southern Mesopotamia may be taken as an example of the latter. It has multiple periods of occupation, in most of which scattered documents are found, albeit unevenly. School tablets, upon which a student has clumsily jotted a few lines, occasionally corrected by a teacher, are a fairly common appearance in trash deposits throughout the site. One quite important group of tablets from the early first millennium – a period in which documents are generally quite rare – was found in soil that was thrown in around a coffin to fill an isolated grave (Cole 1996:1). But even in these instances they provide useful dating information. Tablets of this non-public type, regardless of their subject and completeness, are sensitive chronological indicators, which archaeologists use to anchor stratigraphic sequences. Sometimes they are quite precise. For example, legal and economic texts are often dated to the year, month, and day. All types of writing are sensitive to subtle changes in fashion which make them roughly datable on the basis of style. Datable tablets, or more usually tablet fragments, are used by archaeologists in much the same way that dated coins are used in later archaeological contexts – at a minimum they establish a *terminus post quem* for the archaeological level in which they are found. Since they are generally short-lived in their use and it is a relatively simple matter to discern whether they are in use or discard contexts, they also often suggest, granted less precisely, the end of a range as well.

Display inscriptions have contextual value on those occasions when they survive *in situ*. Foundation deposits, in which inscribed figurines, clay cones, and ceremonial tablets were sometimes placed under the walls of buildings, provide quite reliable information on their sponsors. The same information is provided by stamped bricks, which rulers created in massive numbers in some periods, but these were frequently re-used in other buildings. Inscriptions on stone were often set up as stelae or architectural components to commemorate building activities and historical events, such as military campaigns. These reach a pinnacle of decorative and narrative value in the royal palaces of the Neo-Assyrian kings of the earlier half of the first millennium B.C.E. at Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Nineveh. The findspots of isolated display inscriptions can also provide quite useful historical information. For example, the distribution of building and campaign inscriptions on cliff faces and semi-portable stone blocks, all datable to the reign of a given ruler, are the primary means by which the expansion and decline of the kingdom of Urartu can be traced (Zimansky 1985:48–76). They provide the dates for individual sites, which in turn yield dated pottery and other artifacts.

The issue of context is one in which archaeologists, who view tablets as artifacts, sometimes find themselves in ethical conflict with philologists, who see them as documents that can, to a considerable degree, speak for themselves. Cuneiform tablets and other inscribed objects have, unfortunately, a monetary value and are traded on the antiquities market, despite the fact that they reach that market through illegal excavation and export. Misinformation about their findspots is often

provided as a smokescreen. Moreover, the trade favors whole tablets and ignores fragments, although the latter often contain quite valuable information. In the ground the archaeologists generally find roughly ten fragments per whole tablet, so an illegal excavation is apt to destroy much more textual information than it brings to light. When a document does appear under such circumstances, the ethical position of the archaeologist is absolutely clear. It has been stripped of its context and therefore of much of its value, to say nothing of the damage that is done to archaeological sites generally by unrestrained burrowing. One does not wish to reward the thieves and the operators of the fencing networks in the West or encourage them in greater destruction by publishing and validating their offerings. For those who specialize in reading documents, however, these objects are a great temptation. Cuneiform is sufficiently difficult to counterfeit that Assyriologists are generally confident they can distinguish forgeries from genuine documents, although there are controversies enough on specific cases to raise suspicion on this point. They are used to working with unprovenanced materials since many museum collections were put together almost entirely by purchase, and even catalogues of early excavated tablets contain little more than the name of the site and the date of acquisition. It is only recently that archaeologists have had the opportunity to provide detailed contextual information on tablet findspots and demonstrate the value this adds to the text, and to this day the convention of publishing tablets separately from other excavated artifacts persists. Under these circumstances, many feel that the information in the inscription simply cannot be sacrificed to the deficiencies of its pedigree, thus insuring continued grounds for divorce between archaeology and tablet.

With other, less portable or more perishable written media, this problem of illegal trade and context damage is less pervasive, but still present. The same sorts of information found in cuneiform were committed to these other forms of writing on occasion, but much less of it has survived. We have already noted, for example, the minimal private correspondence incised on lead strips in Luwian hieroglyphs. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic alphabetic writing of the early Iron Age for private purposes has been discovered painted on sherds at such sites as Lachish (Torczyner et al. 1938) and Arad (Aharoni 1981) in Israel. Some of these were letters and others had to do with palace administration. Perhaps the most celebrated discovery is a storage jar sherd from Kuntillet Ajrud on which is written an imprecation to Yahweh and "his Ashera" – the latter a subject of much speculation but looking rather like a wife or female principle that the monotheism of the Biblical text did not prepare us to find in an eighth-century B.C.E. context (Dever 2001:183–187).

With regard to the documentation deliberately created with posterity or a broad propagation of information in mind, alphabetic and Luwian hieroglyphic monuments constitute a corpus similar in character to that in other parts of the world, such as in Rome or among the classic Maya. Most monumental display inscriptions were carved in stone and many were associated with images that bring them into the purview of the history of art. The inscriptions reinforce ideological positions of religion or politics and are themselves a demonstration of power in the mere fact that their creators had sufficient resources to control the written word.

The Scope of Literacy

The number of people who were literate or made use of literacy through scribal intermediaries varied according to time and place, but was undoubtedly more circumscribed than in modern societies. Scribes were trained professionals, and their instruction began at an early age, as a literary composition on the subject in Sumerian makes clear (Kramer 1961:35–45). It is sometimes claimed that the difficulty of the cuneiform writing system itself held back the development of literacy, and societies in which the impact of writing spread beyond the sphere of a small group of palace and temple-based elites could not develop until the alphabet was invented (e.g., Cross 1989:77). The percentage of people who can read, however, seems much more a consequence of societal demand than the technology of writing. The high literacy rates of modern societies like China and Japan undermine the proposition that logo-syllabic writing systems cannot be learned without years of specialized training, and there is, if anything, less evidence for writing in the parts of the Near East that had the alphabet in the second millennium than in Mesopotamia, where cuneiform prevailed.

The Law Code of Hammurabi contains some interesting testimony on literacy. In the epilogue, it states: "Let any wronged man who has a lawsuit come before the statute of me . . . and let him have my inscribed stela read aloud to him, thus may he hear my precious pronouncements" (Roth 1995:134). He is not expected to read it himself. In the Code there is also a law that stipulates a marriage without a formal contract is no marriage (Roth 1995:105). It should be noted, however, that actual marriage contract tablets are not nearly as common in the archaeological record as one would expect if the latter statute is construed as meaning a *written* contract.⁷ Assurbanipal's claim to have actually learned Sumerian and Akkadian, albeit in a different context, suggests that it was unusual enough for a king to be literate to make it worth boasting about.

Within the cuneiform sphere, there is tremendous variation over time and space in the amount of writing and the purposes for which it was employed. In some instances, tablets are associated almost exclusively with large institutions. This is true, for example, in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, when temple and palace both employed scribes to manage their economies as well as create dedicatory and propagandistic inscriptions. At other times, most dramatically in the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods in southern Mesopotamia, the penetration of literacy into the private realm is much more extensive and deep. There are letters from merchant to merchant, wives to husbands, and servants to masters (Oppenheim 1967:73–110, 183–195). Contracts, inheritance documents, transactions in tiny plots of land, etc. demonstrate that practically everyone was making use of the written word, at least indirectly.

It must be emphasized that there is no linear trend in the spread of literacy. There are eras, such as the early Kassite period in southern Mesopotamia, when almost nothing is being written. This is because the sedentary population nearly vanishes, and along with it most of the need for writing, which had its original *raison d'être*

in social complexity and the impersonal nature of large urban environments. In the face-to-face, tribally organized, world of the Kassites there was no more need for writing than there was in Dark Age Europe. At the end of the Bronze Age, writing disappeared from the Anatolian Plateau, which thereafter remained outside the sphere of "cuneiform culture," of which it had so conspicuously been a part during the Hittite Empire.⁸ There are counter-examples of rejuvenation and spread of what might have been assumed to be moribund writing systems: examples of this may be seen in the reappearance of masses of tablets from southern Mesopotamia in the Neo-Babylonian period after centuries of relative scarcity, and the spread of Assyrian-inspired cuneiform in hitherto illiterate eastern Anatolia in the Iron Age.

Chance plays no small role in what archaeologists have recovered. Until the 1970s no writing was known from Early Bronze Age Syria. This situation was suddenly reversed with the discovery of the Ebla archive, as substantial a group of texts as any from Mesopotamia itself in that era. Similar surprises may await us in other areas. The dark age Kingdom of Mitanni, a one-time rival of the Hittites and Egyptians for supremacy in Syria, is known to have made use of writing, but its capital is not securely identified, to say nothing of any royal archives, which could conceivably be as rich as those found at Boğazköy. There are hundreds of display inscriptions from Urartu, but only about two dozen tablets – just enough evidence to demonstrate that writing was being used for mundane administrative purposes and to offer the potential for opening a completely new window on this mysterious kingdom (Zimansky 1985:80–83). This unevenness of coverage over space, time, and societies has a profound impact on the concerns of archaeologists who conduct their research in the broad framework of civilizations that are generally characterized as "historical."

Near Eastern Archaeology as "Historical Archaeology"

The way in which the documentary evidence whose character and availability have been discussed above is integrated with the archaeological record depends to a great extent on the scholarly objectives and philosophical outlook of the individual scholar. Both history and archaeology embrace a variety of perspectives on the methods and ultimate objectives of the study of the human past. In the broadest approach, there is no fundamental difference in the types of evidence. Late in his career, V. Gordon Childe summed up his position in the following terms: "Archaeology is a source of history, not just a humble auxiliary discipline. Archaeological data are historical documents in their own right, not mere illustrations to written texts. Just as much as any other historian an archaeologist studies and tries to reconstitute the process that created the human world in which we live – and us ourselves in so far as we are each creatures of our age and social environment" (Childe 1956:9).

Alternatively, those who construe "history" in a narrower sense as the study of documentary evidence alone, view the scope and specificity of information provided

by the written word as potentially so much greater than anything the material record can supply that archaeology is seen playing a supplemental role, filling in lacunae where documents are lacking or correcting biases of epigraphic sources at best. To the extent that written records are deficient the importance of archaeology increases, but the problems are essentially defined by what has been committed to writing. To cite but one authority: "only *written* documents can give us an assured knowledge of our past that is precise, detailed, and analytical. Prehistorians and archeologists as such can only see a hazy and uncertain outline of the past. This is why *history begins at Sumer*, as is emphasized by the title of a popular book. In other words, history begins in Lower Mesopotamia in the first part of the third millennium" (Bottéro 1992:28 [emphasis original]).

Archaeologists who do not share Childe's view that history is the primary objective of their discipline have yet another orientation. In theoretical literature developed primarily by students of the prehistoric cultures, archaeology is often seen as being a mainstream social science dedicated to explaining human behavior in broadly valid and abstract terms. The very specificity of the written record, and the undeniable fact that it illuminates only selected and specialized components of any given society, relegate it to the margins in the eyes of those who share this orientation. Students of the texts have themselves long recognized that what gets written down is often the atypical rather than the typical; normative practices are not usually recorded (Civil 1980:228). In addition to this, the focus of texts is generally on very limited parts of society. For example, the question of how cities are formed and configured is one upon which written documents can indeed have a bearing, but tablets rarely penetrate to the countryside and do not embrace broad enough sweeps of time to give a sufficiently coherent picture of how the whole economy functions. Thus, the offerings of the tablets can be seen almost as a smokescreen.

This is directly relevant to the appreciation of ancient ideologies, for whose power there is so much concern in the social sciences today. The specific and deliberate communications committed to writing by individuals have material analogues in art, which has an equally vivid capacity for transmitting narrative detail, idiosyncrasy, bombast, and propaganda. The most elaborate of both forms of these "graphic" creations, however, tend to reflect the beliefs and postures of very select individuals. The masses of figurines that archaeologists uncover in greater Mesopotamia, on the other hand, rarely illustrate anything we know of from written myths, legends, and rituals, and certainly do not convey very specific information about popular ideologies, but they do mark out the parameters of shared belief systems.

In short, there are differences in both the methods and aims of using texts in archaeological research in the Middle East, as there are in the study of textually documented cultures elsewhere. These are dependent upon the questions being asked. Few scholars, however, would deny the utility of combining all forms of evidence at some level. Let us consider several examples of the mutual reinforcement of archaeological and documentary evidence, beginning with very general problems and concluding with reference to some that are much more focused. It should be emphasized that virtually all research in the Bronze and Iron Age Near East is

conducted within an historical framework, and cases treated here only hint at the range of possibilities.

The investigation of ancient urbanism in southern Mesopotamia has long engaged the energies of scores of anthropologically trained archaeologists. In the 1960s and 1970s, pioneering survey work of Robert McC. Adams on shifting patterns of settlement in the Tigris-Euphrates alluvium documented the emergence of the first cities and plotted their changing fortunes in subsequent millennia. This has been supplemented by other scholars in southern Mesopotamia and surveys are now routine in all parts of the Middle East. The basic field strategy consists of visiting sites and analyzing pottery scattered on their surfaces, which is the primary material evidence available without recourse to excavation. Except for the rare instances where inscribed objects like stamped bricks are recovered, there is little direct recourse to written evidence, granting that pottery sequences excavated from contexts dated by cuneiform tablets elsewhere lend chronological precision to the historical part of the sequence.

The Mashkan-shapir project, conducted between 1986 and 1990 in southern Iraq, was designed to carry this investigation into Mesopotamian urbanism further by focusing on a question of the spatial organization at a single site (Stone and Zimansky 1995). Were institutions such as palace and temple centrally located with residences of elites in close proximity, as they were in some ancient societies, or was power more decentralized, with rich and poor intermingled throughout the urban environment? There were some obvious criteria for selecting a site at which to treat this problem efficiently – it had to be well preserved with visible surface remains, belong to a single period, and be of sufficient size to be regarded as a city. But the project directors also wanted a site dating to the Old Babylonian period, because that is when tablets were most widely used by different segments of society and offer the best prospect of identifying spatial variations in behavior. In the course of the initial surface survey, dedicatory inscriptions identifying the site as ancient Mashkan-shapir were discovered near a city gate. The existence but not the location of this city had been known from existing texts such as the Code of Hammurabi. Finding the ancient name of the site was neither expected nor required information for the original aims of the project, but did greatly enhance understanding of the context in which the site came into being and was destroyed, by linking it to the political history of the age. Inscribed evidence found in excavation helped to identify what activities were practiced in certain areas. For example, numerous door sealings from a building showed it to have been administered by two brothers. Although the project was cut short by the Gulf War in 1990 after two very short exploratory seasons and one campaign of four months, it did generate a relatively detailed picture of an entire urban setting in which textual evidence played a role in recognizing specialized areas, albeit one of less significance than the purely archaeological identification of such features as streets, temple platforms, harbors, residential structures, manufacturing areas, and graves.

A much better known site, Kültepe (ancient Kanesh), already noted above, provides an example in which textual and archaeological information are much more in balance, and together provide the most detailed information of an ancient trading

network available to modern scholarship.⁹ In this case, the tablets inspired the archaeology. They first appeared on the antiquities market in the late 19th century C.E. and hope of discovering more eventually brought archaeologists to the site, where they were not disappointed. A Turkish team under the direction of Tahsin Özgüç has worked at Kültepe annually since 1948, and tens of thousands of tablets have now been recovered. The site consists of a main mound – a high tell of almost circular plan upon which palatial buildings of the early second millennium B.C.E. have been excavated – and a residential area that arcs around it known as the *karum*, in which merchants from Assyria resided. Almost all of the tablets come from private houses in the *karum* and are concerned with a long-distance trade in metals and textiles. They are the earliest documents from Anatolian soil and have been exploited for evidence on such subjects as the early migrations of Indo-Europeans, the emergence of the Hittites, and the character of the Old Assyrian city-state. In relating texts to archaeology, however, they are most interesting on the subject of trade.

In theory, trade is relatively amenable to archaeological investigation, and objects thought to have moved from one place to another are frequently noted in excavation reports. The mechanisms by which goods are exchanged, are, of course, much less obvious, and there is much controversy in anthropological literature about such matters as whether modern concepts like the law of supply and demand, abstract value, etc. should be applied to ancient societies, or what archaeological traces these would leave if one accepts their existence. Thanks to the tablets, we are in an almost unique position of knowing what goods were being traded, who did the trading, and what institutions were associated with it at Kültepe. We also have the physical remains of the trading colony to look at for correlations. It is a sobering lesson for archaeologists. We see nothing of the tin and textiles that the texts tell us were being brought to Anatolia, nor any of the “money” (gold and silver) sent in return to Assyria. The Assyrian merchants themselves, who were hundreds of miles from home and living in a foreign culture, apparently adopted the living styles of Anatolia and left very little indication of their presence, except for the cuneiform tablets and the seals and sealings associated with them. Yet when the various sources of evidence, textual and archaeological, are taken together, they provide us with a remarkably full picture of how this trading network functioned.

I will limit myself to referring to two additional case studies of the coordination of textual and archaeological evidence, both from Nippur. In the 1950s and 1960s, a University of Chicago expedition there uncovered substantial numbers of tablets dating to the late third and early second millennia B.C.E. from residential areas (TA and TB) and from a temple dedicated to the goddess Inanna. In the case of the latter, Richard Zettler was able to piece together the temple archive, only 10% of which was found *in situ* and the rest in secondary contexts associated with later rebuildings of the temple. He was able to construct a genealogy of temple administrators five generations deep and demonstrate that the temple operated more or less as a family operation, with junior members looking after administrative tasks like sealing doors on no other authority than kinship (Zettler 1987). Elizabeth

Stone, working with documents in more direct contexts from residential areas, was able to correlate real estate transactions with house plans, and trace the history of a family and its fortunes over seven generations (Stone 1987). These two studies present information in the realm of social history that is very far removed from the kind of "kings and battles" theme associated with more public documents. We operate here at the same level as historical archaeology of much more recent periods, with the benefit of documents that are actually found in direct association with artifactual remains.

Conclusions

The study of the ancient Near East offers unique opportunities for the coordination of documentary and archaeological evidence largely because so much of the former is transmitted to us in the form of the latter. There is a great wealth of textual information of different kinds, particularly in what has come to us through cuneiform, which was widely used by numerous civilizations, committed to relatively imperishable materials, and is quite well understood as a writing system by modern scholars. We can hear the voices of the royal propagandists and bureaucrats, and contemplate – if not understand – ancient ideologies through mythological and literary texts. Chronologies and social identities are more perceptible here than they are for most other ancient civilizations.

There are, of course, many caveats and pitfalls in the application of these sources to historical and cultural understanding. The full potential of integrating textual and archaeological data has seldom been realized or even recognized. The overwhelming majority of cuneiform inscriptions were unearthed with little attention to their archaeological context, either before controlled methods of digging were understood or in clandestine excavations directed solely to acquiring marketable portable artifacts. The scholars working with the enormous body of material thus put at their disposal had little incentive for insisting on precise contextual information, nor providing it to their colleagues operating in the field.

Differences in the training, capacities, and objectives between the fields of Assyriology and Near Eastern archaeology have also retarded communication. Interpreting the texts is not always as straightforward as non-specialists might assume. Scribes, presuming knowledge that we simply do not have, leave out much information that we would dearly love to have. This is particularly true in letters, which are rarely dated and emerge from contexts that were well understood by the correspondents, but utterly opaque to us. It is often the exceptional things that get written down, not the routine, and we always run the risk of generalizing from very particular cases with texts. On the other hand, archaeology's strength comes from its concern with the most basic and recurrent elements of human existence. Granted that its data sets are invariably incomplete and often unrepresentative, they still embrace larger segments of society and broader chronological ranges than texts. The primary challenge here is to make reliable and convincing inferences on the basis of large shadows rather than individual points of light.

Yet there is no inherent conflict between these disciplines. Both are mechanisms for recovering information about the past – tools, as it were, for answering questions that the modern world deems important. It is in the questions that the most profound transformations take place, as our cumulative knowledge increases and priorities are altered by shifting perspectives. In most cases, these shifts are toward issues that demand input from archaeology and testimony on peoples, social forces and developments that are not directly addressed by the written word alone. There are numerous approaches to the past, and both historians who work primarily with documents and archaeologists come in different stripes. They have, in the Middle East, more sources for their various quests than those concerned with any other part of the ancient world, and more to gain by recognizing the potential of integrating them.

NOTES

- 1 The term “text” has become so charged in contemporary academic discourse that its use without qualification is no longer possible. In this chapter, I employ the term to refer specifically to documents written in a formal script that transmits information on the basis of human speech – physical manifestations of the specific words of their creators. This restricted definition is adopted not to denigrate the approach of those who see the entire archaeological record as a text to be read and interpreted through culturally conditioned interchange between creators and interpreters. Rather, it is offered to frame and limit the discussion to the arena in which Near Eastern archaeology has one of its more important claims to distinction – the survival of documentary evidence over a longer time range than anywhere else.
- 2 For a succinct overview of the languages written in cuneiform, see Walker (1987, especially pp. 40–47).
- 3 Biblical archaeology constitutes a special case of correlation between material artifact, text, and ideology, which has generated an enormous literature that limitations of space prevent us from treating in detail. For a sampling of some of the recent methods, concerns and controversies of this field, see Bartlett (1997), Dever (2001), Finkelstein and Silberman (2001), King and Stager (2001), and Finkelstein (this volume).
- 4 A concise overview of the types of cuneiform documents available for each period in Mesopotamian history is presented by Van de Mieroop (1999:9–38).
- 5 The few traces of information that have been used to argue that the underlying language was Sumerian, e.g., the arrow, read TI, as a rebus for the word meaning “life” (Bottéro 1992:79–82), have been challenged in detail by Englund, who argues that Sumerian did not enter the country until after the archaic Uruk tablets had been written (Englund 1998:73–81).
- 6 For the non-specialist in cuneiform, an excellent overview on how cuneiform was used to write Elamite, Hurrian, Urartian, and Hattic, as well as the state of our understanding of these languages, is to be found in Gragg (1995).
- 7 Van de Mieroop (1997:10–12) accepts that these were verbal agreements and argues that the only reason “marriage contracts” were put in writing at all was that a transfer of property with monetary value was involved. He cautions that the purposes for which writing was undertaken have to be considered when evaluating cuneiform documents as histor-

- ical sources and these were much more limited than for modern documentation. Using modern rubrics such as "wills" can be quite misleading.
- 8 Gernot Wilhelm has developed the concept of "*Keilschrift-Kultur*" to reinforce the point that a great deal of cultural baggage went along with the writing system that was developed in Mesopotamia when it was borrowed by other societies. This included literary works and religious concepts. The area of this commonality shrank dramatically at the end of the Bronze Age (Wilhelm 1986:95–7).
 - 9 A succinct overview of Kanesh and the Old Assyrian trade may be found in Veenhof (1995), which also includes a brief bibliography of accessible sources on the subject.

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