

SAW Seminar History of Science, History of Text

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Classifying texts in Ancient Mesopotamia; some definitions

Abstract

The cuneiform writing, invented presumably by the Sumerians, has been used for more than 3 millennia, from 3400 BC till the end of the 1st century AD, in a very large area from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf (Bahrein, and certainly more widely in Iran) and from Anatolia to Egypt (El Amarna). There is a great variety of cuneiform texts, each text being intended for a specific use. It is important to correctly appreciate this use to better understand the text. The archaeological context of a document is the first indication of its type (private or institutional building for example), but we often have texts in museums which were bought on the market.

In order to study these ancient texts, assyriologists have built classifications which follows modern standards; these are necessarily schematic. They do not correspond to any classification that could have been made in the Antiquity. We distinguish today:

- The texts of "practice" which were written for an immediate utilitarian purpose,
- The Official texts which were written on any surface
- The scholarly documentation (school texts, scientific and literary texts).

These text categories have flexible lines and some texts may belong to two different categories. Several examples will be developed showing how these categories could be sometimes problematic. Then we will consider collections of texts, private and public archives, and libraries, and when possible, we will analyze how the texts were arranged in the ancient archives.