

Conference Shaping the sciences of the ancient world

Text criticism, Critical editions and Translations of ancient and medieval
scholarly texts (18th-20th centuries) - June 17—21, 2013

From ancient to future edition

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The Sumerians Editing – How and Why

Abstract - Discussions of Sumerian literature concentrate, for practical reasons, on the relatively abundant collections of inscribed clay tablets from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries BCE. Recent studies of this literary material have mainly focused on their practical use as school instructional materials. This synchronic attention to pedagogical matters has been productive, but has become exhausted; here I would like to move back in time a few centuries to contemplate the manner in which the “curriculum” came into being, that is the ancient philological gestures that created this particular version of “Sumerian literature.” This is, of course, a highly speculative undertaking, because it takes us back to a period that is mostly undocumented as far as literary production is concerned.

Many of these texts are preserved in multiple copies from different cities and from different periods, others are known only from one city, or are preserved in single manuscripts. Some texts seem to have been preserved for centuries, undergoing various redactional changes, others survived almost untouched, and still other literary texts had short histories and were quickly forgotten.

How did these texts come to be, how were they edited and why? There are no direct native Mesopotamian answers to such questions. This is not unexpected; there are no abstract narrative explanations of mathematical theory, of the principles underlying divination, or of the structure of the cosmos from these ancient cultures. Is it possible to theorize the social and intellectual contexts that produced literary compositions and the successive redactional ventures that produced the texts that have been recovered? What were the political, psychological and social conditions and consequences of the choice of an artificial idiolect for poetic expression? As a corollary to such questions one must meditate on the ontological status of the examples at our disposal.