

Conference Shaping the sciences of the ancient world

Text criticism, Critical editions and Translations of ancient and medieval
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A historical approach to philology

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EDITING THE SUMERIANS - HOW AND WHY?

Sumerian literary texts appear just before 2500 BC, and only disappear after more than 2000 years in the late first millennium. But when we speak of Sumerian literature, we usually mean the corpus of compositions represented by manuscripts—clay tablets—dating to around 1800 BC, found mainly in the ruins of the Babylonian city, Nippur, and, in lesser numbers, at several other Babylonian sites. These manuscripts were products of an educational curriculum that also produced mathematical and scientific materials, but unlike those, the literary compositions were not intended to impart information or skills, but rather to indoctrinate a scribal elite and construct a Sumerian, or, probably, Babylonian identity.

Although the bulk of these manuscripts was excavated at the end of the 19th century, reliable editions of the Sumerian literary compositions began to appear only in the 1930s. I will trace the history and evolution of Sumerian text editing, focusing on how multiple manuscripts of individual compositions are represented, how variants are evaluated, and how the text of a given composition is reconstructed. I will also explain why text critical methodologies used in Classics or Biblical studies are not applicable to Sumerian literary manuscripts. We do not do stemmata.

But what is the purpose of our critical editions? Without a theory of Sumerian literary production and reception, are these editions anything more than data sets? What are the missing pieces that we will need before we can begin to understand what Sumerian literature really is?

The reception of critical editions of Sumerian literary texts in the scholarly community has been of two sorts, esthetic and curricular. I will review these complementary approaches, with caveats.

Finally, I will briefly mention native approaches to text editing, albeit mainly from first millennium sources.