

Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq

Edited by
Enrique Jiménez and Walther Sallaberger

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Cuneiform Artefacts from Archaeological Contexts: New Research on Ancient Iraq

Proceedings of a Conference Held at the Bavarian
Academy of Sciences and Humanities, July 4–5, 2024

Edited by Walther Sallaberger and Anna Krisztina Pintér

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Illustration on the cover: The perfect archaeological context: Cuneiform tablets in the vessel KEM22B-i203, discovered in a Middle Assyrian house at Kemune. © Kemune Project Archive, with kind permission. Photo by Peter Pfälzner.

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Foreword

This volume publishes papers originally delivered at the conference ‘Cuneiform Artefacts from Archaeological Contexts: New Perspectives’, held July 4–5, 2024, on the premises of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, BAdW) in Munich. The conference and this volume were organised in the frame of the long-term research project ‘Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq in Context’, directed by Walther Sallaberger and Enrique Jiménez, and funded by the Academies’ Programme of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, and based at Munich at Ludwig Maximilians Universität (LMU) and BAdW.

We are indebted to the Bavarian Academy and its President, Professor Markus Schwaiger, and the Secretary of Section I, Professor Henrik Birus, for their benevolent support. The project and the conference owe a great deal to the constant guidance, openness to dialogue, and dedicated backing of Dr. Johannes Bernwieser. We are grateful to the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for the generous funding of this conference. At the conference, the chairpersons Nele Ziegler, Piotr Steinkeller, Daniel Schwemer, Hanan Alessawi, and Helen Gries directed and motivated discussions.

The conference benefited from the professional organisation and personal care by Dr. Benjamin Schönfeld of BAdW and Susan Radwan of our Institut für Assyriologie und Hethitologie at LMU. We thank them and a dedicated group of students for their effective and much-welcome help.

Finally, we thank Harrassowitz Verlag represented by Stephan Specht and especially Julia Guthmüller for professionally bringing the second volume in our CAI (Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq) series to publication.

Munich, April 2026

Walther Sallaberger
Anna Krisztina Pintér

Conventions

The system of references to secondary literature and to cuneiform texts basically follows the guidelines of 'Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie'. The abbreviations used are those of the 'Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie'. Accentuation is indicated by italics, not bold type.

The rules for transliterations basically follow the standard of W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden 1956–1981). The notation of Mesopotamian measures follows M. Powell, *Maße und Gewichte*, *RIA* 7 (1987) 457–530.

Ancient dates apply the standard system 'king year/month/day', and modern dates are given in the same sequence.

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I

Theoretical Frame

The Tasks of Cuneiform Philology: a Praxeological Perspective

Abstract: Is it a task of the Assyriologist to consider the archaeological context of cuneiform artefacts? This inevitably leads to the wider question: What is Cuneiform Philology, the basis of Assyriology, Hittitology, and Sumerology, and on what basis and for what goal is it pursued? This article aims at a definition, whereby the Theory-of-Practices approach allows for grasping the mutual interdependence of artefact and text, language and historical situations. The model presented here, a praxeologically based definition of Cuneiform Philology, challenges the assumption that a distinction can be made between the basic 'craft' of deciphering and editing and 'more advanced' interpretation. 'Language,' 'religion,' and 'society' don't merely occur as abstract systems, but are manifested in concrete practices, including the writing of texts in cuneiform. The archaeological context offers an important starting point for reconstructing the practices in which cuneiform artefacts were created and used.¹

1 The Assyriologist and archaeological contexts

Probably nobody would deny that the archaeological context in which a cuneiform artefact was found may contribute essentially to its interpretation. Already, when the unique and vast royal collection of cuneiform tablets, known as the 'Library of Ashurbanipal,' was discovered in Nineveh from 1849 onwards, the larger archaeological context became a relevant factor. The findspot in Assyrian palaces contributed essentially to the notion of a royal library, beyond the colophons of Ashurbanipal written on the tablets. The background of a royal palace has always been relevant when dealing with objects from this collection, despite the well-known absence of detailed recordings of the find-spots. Many other assemblages of cuneiform artefacts are defined by their archaeological contexts, some of which are discussed in more detail in this volume. Whereas the archaeologist's task may seem well defined by securing the material context of the artefacts and interpretational aspects, including increasingly scientific research methods, the role of the Assyriologists seems less clear in this undertaking. Should the pure philologists not bother too much about findspots, deposition, materiality, archaeological assemblages, etc.? Would palaeography, grammar, or lexicon not be considered their task, better leaving other aspects aside? However, how should one delimit what the task of an Assyriologist is?

With the many specialisations existing in Assyriology as in any other academic field, an answer may seem difficult at first sight. But if specialisations are taken as sub-fields of a discipline, they should all be included in a valid description. A classical model for conceptualising the task of philology (and other humanities disciplines) is the so-called hermeneutic circle, in which the meaning of a text is developed through constant reference to the whole

1 For discussions, criticism, and references at various stages of my work on this essay, I am deeply grateful to Anna Glenn, Friedhelm Hartenstein, Adrian C. Heinrich, Enrique Jiménez, Carola Metzner-Nebelsick, Peter-Arnold Mumm, Bernhard Palme, Anna Pintér, Karen Radner, Nicole J. Saam, Katharina Schmidt, Wolfgang Schulze (†), and Philipp Stockhammer. Previous versions of this paper were presented and discussed at various occasions over the last five years.

and its contexts. The specific historical situation in which a text was written shapes approaches to its interpretations (as incomplete as they necessarily must remain). Therefore, essentially, philology implies the study of contexts relating to ancient political, social, religious, economic, linguistic, and other contexts.² It need not be underlined here that the historical situation is likewise considered and reconstructed by the archaeologist interpreting the same inscribed objects. Since the early days of research in ancient Mesopotamia, Assyriologists have engaged themselves in observing archaeological contexts for their study. Can this practice be integrated into the ‘work-profile’ of philologists? Or do they transgress the limits of their discipline? This essay touches the underlying broader question of how to define cuneiform philology, thereby basing the result neither on subjective evaluations nor on (perhaps too optimistic or too pessimistic) descriptions of the actual status of the field, but on an argumentative line of reasoning from the character of the data to the practices of the discipline. The resulting conclusions might perhaps be considered self-evident and well-known. Still, the point is not to revolutionise or redefine a discipline, but to provide a theoretically founded definition of the tasks of cuneiform philology and thus a point of reference for methodological issues.

2 Posing the question:

From ‘What is Assyriology?’ to ‘What is Cuneiform Philology?’

What is Assyriology? There is general agreement in the public presentation of the discipline: it is a combination of methods for researching societies characterised by cuneiform tradition. The definition of Assyriology given in Wikipedia corresponds to numerous descriptions of the discipline as formulated at universities worldwide:

Assyriology [...], also known as Cuneiform studies or Ancient Near East studies, is the archaeological, anthropological, historical, and linguistic study of the cultures that used cuneiform writing. (Wikipedia ‘Assyriology’, accessed September 26, 2025)

When it comes to a more detailed description of the subject, the role of philology is emphasised:

Die Altorientalistik ist eine philologische, d.h. mit Sprachen, Texten und Literaturen arbeitende, und eine (kultur-)historische Disziplin zugleich.³ (Streck 2023, 31, adding the close relation with Near Eastern Archaeology)

In these two descriptions of the field, philology is mentioned in the same breath as other approaches. What is the relationship between philology and these other scholarly disciplines? From the perspective of some scholars, philology is a discipline that is useful in its work on cuneiform texts but remains superficial in theory and cannot adequately investigate the essence of things. This can only be achieved by other scholarly disciplines. As an example

² Acknowledging the central role of contexts both in the formation and in the decoding of cuneiform artefacts has been a central parameter in defining the research agenda of the long-term project ‘Cuneiform artefacts of Iraq in Context’ (CAIC). The present article spells out how philology can be defined in a theoretically consistent form.

³ ‘Ancient Near Eastern Studies is both a philological discipline, i.e. one that deals with languages, texts and literature, and a (cultural-)historical discipline.’

for the field of history, Marc Van De Mieroop can be quoted in the introduction to his 1999 book 'Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History':

[T]he book aims to demonstrate how the cuneiform textual sources can be used in various aspects of historical research. Scholars of Mesopotamia often are so wrapped up with the philological difficulties that their sources present that the historical usage of them becomes an afterthought, mostly informed by ideas of common sense. The discipline is exceedingly empirical in its approach. (Van De Mieroop 1999, 3)

The historian expects that the cuneiform artefact and its text serve as a 'source' for historical questions. This view of cuneiform texts as 'sources' for specific fields of knowledge also applies to other areas, including not only law, religion, economics and the history of science, but often the description of languages as such, phonology, grammar and lexicon, from a historical and comparative linguistic perspective. If cuneiform texts are viewed primarily as 'sources' for specific topics, i.e. as a database for 'actual research', then it is not a far stretch to postulate a contrast between theoretically based approaches and philology.

The interpretation of texts from ancient Mesopotamia is dominated by a strongly anti-theoretical philological tradition that often looks with derision and suspicion at attempts to discuss hermeneutic issues. The immense difficulties with basic matters of establishing reliable text editions, reference grammars and dictionaries have provided a seemingly impenetrable barrier of arguments against critical reflection, and have conspired to postpone interpretive issues to a mythical time when the groundwork will have been laid ... One may, of course, note that it is not possible to provide these 'foundations' without critical thought, and that matters of interpretation are involved from the very first moment that one approaches a text; this is often viewed as mere quibbling, however. (Michalowski 1990, 381; cited approvingly by Ambos/Zisa 2021, 9)

Here, the author distinguishes between anti-theoretical philology with text editions, grammar, and dictionaries on the one hand, and critical reflection and interpretive issues on the other. However, philology is acknowledged to involve interpretation in all work on texts. This is not an isolated opinion, and the juxtaposition of technical editorial work and interpretative elaboration was perhaps more common in the 1990s,⁴ but it is still widespread today.⁵ In contrast to such views, this article takes the position that philology, if conducted strictly according to its own research rationale, must incorporate aspects of neighbouring disciplines such as archaeology, history, linguistics, etc.

4 'Nun, da zwei Generationen von Forschern das elementare philologische und archäologische Handwerkzeug bereitgestellt haben, setzt eine neue forschungsgeschichtliche Phase ein, und das junge Fach beginnt, sich zu entfalten' (Maul 1998, 271).

5 'In heutiger wissenschaftlicher Praxis ist das Edieren eine Grundlagenarbeit, welche die Voraussetzung für die weitere Erschließung und Interpretation historischer Zeugnisse, insbesondere texttragender →Artefakte, darstellt. Vielfach werden dabei neben einer in den Haupttext gesetzten Textfassung in einem wissenschaftlichen Apparat Hinweise auf divergierende Lesarten sowie Quellenangaben und weitere Anmerkungen geboten.' ... 'Edieren in diesem Sinne stellt also einen Umwandlungsprozess dar. Edieren ist Transformieren, Übertragen, Übersetzen. Um das Edieren und Edition(en) zu beschreiben, lohnt der differenzierte Blick auf die unterschiedlichen Ebenen, auf denen die editorische Umwandlung geschieht.' (Petzold et al. 2015, 219–220).

A theoretical reflection on the tasks of philology has been lacking until now. This is not only the case for Assyriology; Roger Bagnall's description of Papyrology, presented in the same decade of the 1990s, also addresses this point:

Papyrology has [...] not been a very reflective discipline. [...] The reasons for this state of affairs probably lie mainly in the enormous technical demands of the discipline. Although papyrology is, from the point of view of research tools, a well-organized and provided field, it demands of its practitioners a tremendous investment of time in mastering palaeography, languages, editorial technique, and a specialized body of detailed information about institutions. Only a minority of those who work with the papyri have the combination of energy and interest to go beyond the work of editing and criticizing texts to that of using them for wider historical investigation, and hardly any of these have then taken the further measure of stepping outside the role of historian to look at the character of the enterprise itself. (Bagnall 1995, 1–2)

Although Assyriologists had not developed a theoretically sound technical definition, they could at least refer to Benno Landsberger's inaugural lecture on the *'Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt'* ('Intrinsic conceptualisation of the Babylonian world')⁶ from 1926, which has since become a classic. According to Landsberger, philologists should not apply existing concepts, but rather adapt their analysis to the subject under investigation: the texts and the language determine the choice of approach. This requires a thorough knowledge of scholarly concepts and methodologies, for example, those of linguistics or religious studies (Landsberger 1926, 358). For Landsberger, philology is therefore more than an inventorisation of 'sources'. The methodology involves engaging with concepts and theories in order to deal comprehensively with texts and language in a wider perspective. The *Eigenbegrifflichkeit* (intrinsic conceptualisation) applies both to the specific character of the cuneiform corpus, the object of study, and to the sought-for precise fits in translation and description of this corpus.

Landsberger's approach was never forgotten, and in a quite comparable manner, A. Leo Oppenheim emphasised how one could free oneself from imposed categories:

I would like to establish what these tablets meant to those who wrote them. I do not want to assign them importance, meaning, and literary qualities derived, consciously or not, from our own culture-conditioned preferences. (Oppenheim 1977, 12)

There are approaches to describing the tasks and objectives of Cuneiform Philology. Johannes Renger emphasises their implementation in actual practice:

[...] ANEPH [i.e., Ancient Near Eastern philology and history] finds itself in a dilemma: first, the urgent task remains to make unpublished material in the form of autographies accessible; in addition, there is a pressing need to edit the content of known material and to develop syntheses. [...] In the last few decades, exemplary editorial standards have been developed for this purpose. This included making hand-drawn copies of and collating the texts. In view of the many duplicates of literary texts, the

6 *'Eigenbegrifflichkeit'* was translated as 'conceptual autonomy' (by Th. Jacobsen, B. R. Foster, and H. von Siebenthal; Landsberger et al. 1977), and indeed, German *'eigen'* may imply the notion of autonomy as well. Pointing to autonomy underlines the independence of Assyriology from other fields of research, but it does not cover Landsberger's wider and deeper notion that the specific intrinsic character of languages and texts written in cuneiform necessitates its own and proper (*'eigen'*) language and concepts of analysis.

reader not only had to be informed of variants, but the actual degree of preservation of each text passage had to be laid out as well, [...]. In this context, increasing attention has been paid to issues of paleography and the scribal culture. [...] (Renger 2006)

More recently, Eva Cancik and Jochem Kahl have also referred to the differentiation of methods in philology:

Diese Philologie definiert sich im Kern als das kritische Studium vorhandener Textbestände verbunden mit der Re- und Neu-Edition von Texten. Die Methoden und Instrumentarien der Philologie in Mesopotamien und Ägypten weisen ein breites Spektrum auf: Sprachwissenschaft, Grammatologie, Text- und Literaturwissenschaft, Editionswissenschaft und Lexikographie bilden die Basis dieser Disziplin.⁷ (Cancik/Kahl 2018, 46)

Over the last two decades, this diversity of methods has moved into the background in digital editions, as these corpora, mostly designed for specialists, contain a standardised transliteration of a text, occasionally a translation, combined with information facilitating the identification of artefacts and searchability. Is this then philology in its purest form? Or is philological methodology being reduced to a few elements, admittedly for understandable pragmatic considerations? Against this background, a critical discussion of what cuneiform philology actually comprises appears all the more urgent today.

3 Why do we need a definition of ‘Cuneiform Philology’?

One could easily add more details and references to the preceding sketch, but this would change little of the fact that Assyriology as a discipline today encompasses both cuneiform philology and elements of history and other historical disciplines, linguistics, etc. The study of linguistics, societies and their cultures, history or archaeology can draw on methodologies developed for regions and periods other than the ‘Ancient Near East’ for theoretical foundations. However, the study of cuneiform artefacts and their texts remains the defining feature of the discipline (see Radner/Robson eds. 2011). The following discussion focuses on this essential core area, and for this reason, the term ‘Cuneiform Philology’ is preferred over ‘Assyriology’ (and, if one wishes, to parallel terms like ‘Sumerology’ or ‘Hittitology’).

What is philology? The ‘rough-and-ready working definition’ by Sheldon Pollock ‘at the same time embodies a kind of program, even a challenge: philology is, or should be, the discipline of making sense of texts’ (Pollock 2009, 934).

Cuneiform philology (as the core subject of Assyriology) studies the texts that scribes wrote in cuneiform script on objects, mostly clay tablets, over the three last millennia before the Christian Era, and which have since reached us through excavations. The approaches that contribute most fruitfully to accessing this cultural heritage are determined to a lesser extent by academic disciplines than by the properties of the cuneiform artefacts; above, reference was made to a related comment by Landsberger (1926, 358). Thus, in Assyriology, a distinction comparable to that made in Classics between philology (dealing mostly with literature), epigraphy (for inscriptions) and papyrology (for hand-written manuscripts, of-

⁷ This philology is essentially defined as the critical study of existing textual material combined with the re-editing and new editing of texts. The methods and tools of philology in Mesopotamia and Egypt cover a broad spectrum: linguistics, grammatology, textual and literary studies, editorial studies and lexicography form the basis of this discipline.

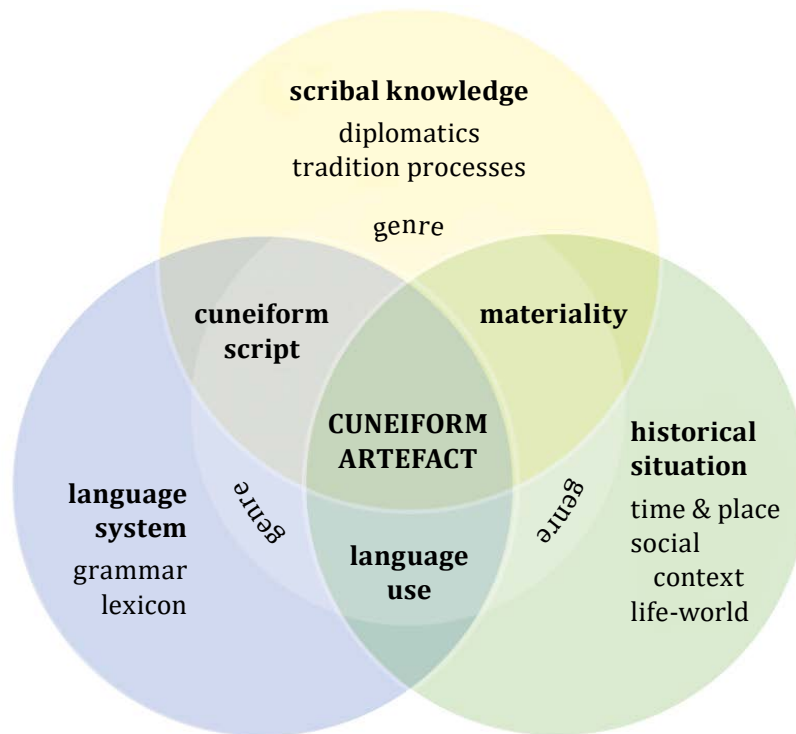


Fig. 1. *The cuneiform artefact as a product by, medium for, and witness of (1) scribal knowledge, (2) language, and (3) a historically defined social site*

ten archival texts) has never been established, because in the cuneiform corpus, the literary texts, like the inscriptions, were found in their context of use, and because inscriptions and archival texts do not differ fundamentally in terms of their palaeography, their institutions, or their regional and chronological distribution. Due to the character of the languages documented in cuneiform script, Semitic or Indo-European studies are relevant to certain areas of Cuneiform Philology, whereas the surviving texts do not offer themselves to study, for example, the personalities of authors.

Consequently, the first step in describing the field of Cuneiform Philology is to conceptualise its subject matter in a way that allows one to deduce the main research areas and methods and present them in their mutual relations. Basically, the discipline deals with texts *written* in cuneiform script. By definition, writing serves as a sign system for *verbal communication*; the latter is embedded within a *social site*. Accordingly, the following three domains must be covered when studying artefacts with cuneiform writing: script, language, and historical situation; these constituted both necessary and sufficient preconditions for the production and usage of cuneiform artefacts. In Fig. 1, the cuneiform artefact is presented as the result, means and witness of the corresponding three horizons of knowledge, embodied in actors of the same social site, both scribes and readers, speakers of the same language:

- (1) scribal knowledge held by those involved in the production and reception of texts;
- (2) speakers' knowledge of the language system of grammar and lexicon that governs the text on the artefact;
- (3) the knowledge of all persons as determined by the historical situation, i.e. by time, place and contexts with their social orders and practices.

Both the scribes and readers were speakers of the respective language, and they were also members of a society in a historical context. The scribes succeeded in the material realisation, and they also followed the language use required in a historical situation when they composed a document.

4 Cuneiform artefacts as records of verbal communication in historical situations

The term ‘artefact’ for writing media (Tsouparopoulou/Meier 2015) deliberately adopts archaeological terminology (Eggert 2014), but above all takes into account the fact that the clay tablets and other written supports dealt with by cuneiform philology are culturally shaped objects which, in their specific material form and their individual presence, refer to the agents (or subjects) involved, who constructed and perceived meanings in their actions here. With the materiality of the research object, reference is made to the fruitful approach of the theory of social practices (e.g., Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2002). According to this theory, artefacts are just as much a part of social practices as the participants. The actors internalise and reproduce knowledge about practices, thereby creating a social world of meaning. Practice theory thus describes individual practices or entire bundles of practices as expressions of routines and conventions, which ultimately always involve an element of unpredictability. Practices are therefore always linked to a historical situation.

Agency, that is to say, is that through which the mesh of practices and orders is continuously taking place and frequently mutating. Accordingly, an account of the social site is inherently one of ceaseless movement and incessant rearrangement and re-organization, even if it is not explicitly developed as such. (Schatzki 2002, 189–190)

The connection of the social theory approach to time and place is what renders it so attractive for a historical discipline such as Assyriology.

The most straightforward way to begin the description is with the artefacts themselves, usually rectangular to round tablets or similar objects made of clay, which have preserved their inscriptions over thousands of years.

All artefacts inscribed with cuneiform script were ultimately excavated in locations where they had either been deliberately deposited or where they had been discarded or secondarily relocated. Even under adverse preservation conditions, they were often found not far from the place of deposition, where they could once be read, and they may even have remained at or near the place of writing. Since most artefacts were discovered in clusters rather than as single items, the textual data, in conjunction with the location of discovery, often permit conclusions to be drawn about the institutional context, revealing, for example, whether the assemblages are from the family archives in a residential building or the tablet repository of traditional texts in a temple (Hilgert 2013). The term ‘assemblage’ is probably best suited to describe a cluster of written artefacts from a specific archaeological context (see the Introduction to this volume).⁸ Another example of the central role of the location where an artefact was found are building inscriptions, when they were discovered in or at least near the building for which they were written.

Although a large number of known cuneiform artefacts do not originate from scientific and documented excavations, but from treasure hunters and looters, it often proves possible to reconstruct dossiers reflecting institutional and spatial contexts even in such cases.

8 Another term used is ‘manuscript collections’ (term *Manuskriptkollektion* coined by Cancik/Kahl 2018, 106, following Charpin), which, however, presupposes the existence of a collector as an agent.

However, if the find situation is archaeologically documented, conditions are more favourable for describing the context in which a document or an assemblage of cuneiform artefacts was written and read in its environment. The archaeological context, if documented and analysed or reconstructed, is, alongside the cuneiform artefacts themselves, the most important piece of evidence for interpreting the historical situation of written linguistic communication. It is therefore best practice in Cuneiform Philology to take archaeological data into account appropriately (and in interdisciplinary exchange).

Markus Hilgert (2010) coined the term '*Text-Anthropologie*' for studying the relationships between written artefacts and social practices. The materiality of cuneiform artefacts, from simple clay tablets to stone stelae or statues bearing royal inscriptions, has never been ignored in Assyriology, but has become a focus of interest over the last two decades (e.g., Balke/Tsouparoulou eds. 2016; Michel 2021). On the data side, this has been promoted by the documentation of writing supports in digital photography and 3D techniques, as well as by scientific investigations (e.g. Watanabe 2011; Taylor/Cartwright 2011; Tuji et al. 2014, Van Buylaere et al. 2019). On the theoretical side, increased praxeological interest in materiality has contributed to this development (e.g. Cancik/Schnitzlein eds. 2018; Betrò et al. eds. 2024). Materiality also concerns diplomatics, as it deals with the arrangement and layout of the script on the artefact (e.g. Charpin 2018), as well as palaeography, as it explores the historical, regional, contextual and material variation of cuneiform writing—archaisms, calligraphy, character differentiation, etc. (e.g. Devecchi et al. eds. 2015; 2019). The individual artefact is thus a testimony to acquired and practised scribal knowledge with regard to its material form, including its script. Here and in Fig. 1, the term 'scribal knowledge' does not address the specific roles of the author or the client. Rather, it refers to the fact that cuneiform signs are applied in their customary form to the appropriate writing medium in a specific layout (Meier et al. eds. 2015).⁹

Cuneiform philology is a discipline that deals with the texts recorded on the artefacts mentioned earlier (defined by their materiality and archaeological context). Here, too, the practices of the scribes come into play, first and foremost their knowledge of text types or 'genres'. Since 'genre' as a term need not be limited to literary texts, the two terms are used synonymously here. From a text-linguistic perspective, the text type is determined decisively by the text function, i.e. the dimension of verbal action. This builds on the approach of linguistic pragmatics, which initially focused on the definition of phrases as speech acts (following Searle 1969; cf. e.g. Heinemann/Vieweger 1991; Fix 1998; Linke 2014). Text types represent conventionalised linguistic patterns that have been created, handed down and modified as social practices for the success of linguistic communication. Wolfgang Schulze understands genre as

eine in entsprechenden sprachlichen Strukturen [z.B. Lexikon] und Mustern (Texturen) [z.B. Syntax] paradigmatisch und syntagmatisch organisierte Wissensebene, die ein wesentlicher Teil des kognitiv vorformatierten, konventionalisierten Sprachhandlungswissens einer Sprechergemeinschaft ist. (Schulze 2020, 595)¹⁰

Discussions about the classification of text types or genres prove to be a notoriously sensitive topic in Ancient Near Eastern Studies (e.g., Vanstiphout 1986; 1999), as there is a concern to combine (top-down) praxeologically defined, socially and culturally anchored

9 Awareness of the artefact (as a term and as an object) should ensure that digital editions, for example, are not regarded as 'the text'.

10 A level of knowledge organised paradigmatically and syntagmatically in corresponding linguistic structures [e.g. lexicon] and patterns (textures) [e.g. syntax], which is an essential part of the cognitively preformatted, conventionalised linguistic action knowledge of a speech community.

communication strategies with (bottom-up) classificatory efforts to categorise the surviving written records (on this problem, see Schulze 2020, 600–601). For the rough classification of the corpus, the discipline generally takes a classificatory approach and divides the collection into three ‘genre classes’, which can also be maintained from a praxeological point of view (e.g. Oppenheim 1977, 13–24; Hallo 1996, 174–175): (1) archival texts written for everyday use by specific recipients in a particular historical situation, primarily administrative and legal documents as well as letters, which comprise the majority of the entire corpus; (2) texts of the scribal tradition, also referred to as canonical texts (for the problematic term, see e.g. Ryholt/Barjamovic 2016), i.e., poetic or technical works handed down by scribes as scholars that convey verbal, religious and scholarly knowledge that prototypically could be used in different historical situations; (3) inscriptions or monumental texts,¹¹ which are often written on objects made of baked brick, stone or metal, to identify and honour the person associated with the object in a specific historical situation and to transmit this to posterity (Radner 2005). As with all categorisations, there are doubtful cases as well as transitions from one group to another. Two examples may illustrate this: an inscription (3) becomes literature of tradition (2) through copying; a seal, i.e. an inscription (3), was rolled onto legal documents (1).

For a more detailed classification, formal criteria (text structure, phraseology) play a role in addition to emic genre terms. Historical processes of tradition and adaptation led to constant changes. Well-established text patterns, for example, those used for loan contracts, could document obligations of various kinds; cuneiform signs, vocabulary or mathematical operations were conveyed in list form; conversely, the same royal deeds were processed in hymns, inscriptions on objects or in year dates.

The genre or text type had a fundamental influence on the material design of a cuneiform artefact, including its material, size and shape, the layout of the writing, and whether it demanded a case or sealing. On the other hand, the graphic character of the signs depended on the genre, ranging from hasty notes to calligraphy, everyday writing typical of the time or archaic inscriptions. Scribal knowledge was applied in terms of diplomatics and script, with the conventions of scribal usage of transmitted traditions acquired in ‘school’ (such as the form and use of phonograms and logograms), and the practices customary in a given communicative context and appropriate to a genre (e.g. the contributions in Devecchi et al. ed. 2015; 2019; Béranger 2019; Touillon-Ricci 2022).

Genre additionally served as a conceptual, standardised model for verbal action in text production and reception. Accordingly, Akkadian and Sumerian texts are not simply evidence of verbal expressions that arrange words according to the grammatical rules of a ‘language’, but ultimately evidence of conventionalised language use within certain text types as patterns of action. This gives genre a central role when choosing a praxeologically based theoretical approach. Text types are often characterised by linguistic features such as specific syntax (e.g., tense system, ‘if’ clauses), lexicon (poetic, everyday and technical language) or idiomatic expressions, clauses and passages (as, for example, in legal documents or prayers). Lexical diversity in poetic texts, for example, is likewise a convention characteristic of text types. From a praxeological perspective, phenomena in traditional literature, such as intertextuality and recurring phrases, can plausibly be understood as shared knowledge among the actors and as conventions of the text type.

Particularly in the case of cuneiform texts, for which modern readers share little knowledge with the scribes as the text producers, the content of a text is often not understood directly. Therefore, a philological edition should also offer comments on language use from a linguistic-pragmatic perspective. For instance: How do we understand the tone of an ev-

11 The term ‘monumental’ indicates that the text is written on a ‘monument’, not that it is ‘monumental’ in size.

everyday letter? If in the Akkadian text an instruction is given only as a chain of imperatives, with no ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ and even a hint of a shortcoming introduced by a rhetorical question ‘Why haven’t you...?’, does this mean that the sender has written a rude letter in an imperious tone? A pragmatic analysis reveals that the usual conventions in a specific social context—preferably among equals—of 19th–18th century BCE Babylonia were followed here, and it also realised Grice’s conversational maxims perfectly: The letters were (for the recipients at the time) informative, appropriately clear, relevant and—intentionally—true. If such a letter also states that the recipient should carry out the instruction ‘if you are my brother’ then a literal translation leaves the action completely unclear: is it an emotional appeal or a cleverly used argument? Neither is correct; it was a routine formula used to mitigate a request politely, an ancient Babylonian *‘s’il te plaît’*; routine formulas, however, wear out, ‘if you are my brother’ was replaced by ‘if you love me’, but even the extension ‘if you really love me’ could not prevent all three phrases from falling out of use over the course of three centuries, and new formulations were required. Such linguistic routines may be familiar to the Assyriological specialist through frequent reading. However, my own work on linguistic pragmatics, verbal politeness, argumentation and text structure in everyday Old Babylonian letters (Sallaberger 1999) has shown me to what extent appropriate, theoretically sound categories may be useful in describing philological ‘empirical knowledge’.

Language use essentially involves the application of rules that are summarised under the broad concept of ‘grammar’. However, the language system should not be understood as an independently existing linguistic structure; rather, the language system itself may equally be understood as a conventionalised practice of verbal action that is processed in cognitive processes (The Five Graces Group 2009; Schmid 2016; Mumm 2018: 37–60; Schmid 2020). Schmid 2020 elaborates in detail on the three-step process of usage, conventionalisation and entrenchment of the language system and its dynamics. It is a social practice that correct grammatical forms are passed on, and errors are sanctioned. The power of strong traditions on speakers is particularly evident when different forms of the language system feature regional or historical variation.¹²

Authors of archival texts may mostly have been speakers of the language in which the texts were written, but it is widely acknowledged that the written form obscures differences between spoken and written language. Furthermore, copyists of traditional literature may often have been further distanced from the language of the texts they wrote. In this regard, Assyriologists make a clear distinction between the social contexts of composition and copying.

Although cuneiform languages have been preserved exclusively in written form, making it difficult to study an individual’s language acquisition, phenomena such as language change, regional peculiarities and different language registers demonstrate even for dead languages how the language system was shaped by social practice (e.g., Sallaberger 2011).

The Akkadian and Sumerian vocabulary documented in the texts is determined by the historical situation and the type of text, not least with regard to the choice of words, i.e. at the expression/*signifiant* level. Knowledge of text types is only a fraction of the complete shared world knowledge of text producers and recipients, within which a lexeme semantically points to the referents (*signifié* level) in a specific historical situation; the meaning of a word is determined by its use (Wittgenstein). If we link this to the actions of text production, we obtain a guideline on how to deal with vocabulary; in traditional literature,

12 This can be illustrated with two well-known examples. In Assyrian, the verb denotes a third person feminine singular (difference of ‘NN does’ between NN as ‘she’ and ‘he’), but in the Babylonian area of communication, this distinction did not exist. The tempus system shifted around the middle of the second millennium BCE: the t-perfect became the narrative tense for past events. Such examples are among the topics covered in standard grammars and specialised studies.

e.g. lexical lists, we would locate points of reference in other texts, while at the other end of the spectrum, the lexicon of administrative documents refers to everyday experience in a specific historical situation. *Langue* is therefore not so much a generally existing system; rather, certain strands of language were made available for a specific text.

Like other archaeological artefacts, cuneiform objects originate from a specific 'historical situation' that is initially defined chronologically (e.g., by the date noted in the texts), locally (in a room and building, a city, a region) and by the institutional context (family, palace, economic unit), social order and practices; often further differentiation is possible (e.g. writing, reading and usage, deposition as a chronological sequence), but the basic data outlined above allows for classification within historical processes. The historical situation refers to the respective *Lebenswelt* (life-world), the material culture with its forms of housing, food and clothing or handcrafted tools, to social and political orders and practices and cultural symbol systems, i.e. the living space that shaped the world knowledge of the authors, scribes, and recipients. The cuneiform sources cover a period of three millennia, ranging from the Early Bronze Age city-states of the third millennium to the territorial states of the Middle Bronze Age, the international Later Bronze Age period, and the great empires of the Iron Age and their successors; at the same time, striking technological, economic, religious and cultural developments were taking place. A linguistic expression may use the same words, but the frame of reference had changed; think of terms such as 'king', Sumerian *lugal*, Akkadian *šarru*, referring to the divine king of the late third millennium, to every Old Babylonian ruler or to the Iron Age leader of an empire; or the term for 'humanity' from Old Babylonian *awilūtum*, 'humanity' and the status of a free citizen, to the Middle and Late Babylonian *amīlūtu* 'staff'. The characteristics of the language present in specific historical situations and genres demand that translating a text using only grammar and a dictionary usually does not suffice.

Every Assyriological translation, therefore, also reflects the reconstruction of a historical situation. Conversely, the translation and, above all, the vocabulary provide an important starting point for exploring and researching ancient Mesopotamian life-worlds and horizons of knowledge. The world knowledge of the text producers also included specific people, places and gods, who appear with their proper names. Reference was made not only to names that were known across regions and over long periods of time, but above all to the actors in their respective institutional environments, family members, correspondents, and individuals in key administrative positions, who, in the *personnalisation du système* (Sigrist 1992, 68) characteristic of ancient Mesopotamia, were referred to by their proper names rather than their titles or roles.¹³ Philological analysis requires a historical reconstruction of the social site, and with an understanding of the roles of individuals, the archaeological context with which we started this overview comes back into play.

5 From the conditions of production to philological methodology

To summarise: preserved cuneiform artefacts represent written evidence of verbal actions by agents (in the Ancient Near East) who followed standardised and routine practices, ensuring that they were accepted and understood in the respective context of shared knowledge. Text production was decisively influenced by the historical social situation, because the use of a language or a particular language variety with its specific vocabulary, as well as the orthog-

13 Combined with the information from findspots and artefacts one may thus approach the 'textual communities' whose traces are studied by philology (following Radner/Robson 2011, xxvii; see also Cancik-Kirschbaum/Kahl 2018).

raphy, the writing medium or the chosen text type, corresponded to the practices known and practised in a particular place, at a particular time, in a particular social and institutional environment and within a particular writing tradition for a specific purpose. Unlike in an analysis of contemporary communication, when researching written records of past, distant, 'dead' cultures, the world knowledge of the text producers and recipients of that time cannot simply be assumed to be known but must be part of the text analysis and reconstruction.

The methodology of Cuneiform Philology is determined by its subject matter: ancient Near Eastern artefacts bear cuneiform inscriptions, signs encoding languages that were used in texts as a means of communication in historical situations. A praxeological approach allows all facets of cuneiform artefacts and their texts to be described without isolating them from their social contexts. It strikes me as crucial that, within this framework, the best practices of Cuneiform Philology, as carried out since the discipline was established in the late nineteenth century CE, can be constructively developed further. For a sound edition of an individual text, one considers not only reading and translation, but also palaeographic, grammatical and lexical peculiarities, as well as the materiality of the artefact, the social institutional context and the historical situation in which the text was produced. Conversely, every text interpretation contributes to an understanding of language and writing usage, of verbal action and the life world in ancient Mesopotamia. The edition and interpretation of texts, therefore, also requires an understanding of archaeology, diplomatics, linguistics, text linguistics and historical topics. And indeed, countless positive examples from Assyriological research could be cited for such an understanding of what text editions can be.

The proposed model of a praxeologically defined Cuneiform Philology, furthermore, excludes any distinction between the 'simple craftsmanship' of deciphering and editing and 'advanced interpretation'. Rather, a praxeologically grounded cuneiform philology forms the starting point for integrating work on religion, society, law, literature, the history of science, etc. into philology. In the same way as language, also 'religion' and 'society' do not exist as abstract systems, but occur in concrete practices, including the writing of texts. Seen from the side of the reader of philological studies, a cuneiform artefact and the text recorded on it do not 'speak for themselves'; rather, their meaning arises from linguistic, pragmatic, institutional and historical contexts. The specialised philologist may have internalised such features through constant involvement in a corpus, but others would have difficulty to read and understand properly a translated text.¹⁴

Within the framework of a Theory of Social Practices (praxeology; e.g. Reckwitz 2002; 2003; Schatzki 2002), it is possible not only to pursue linguistic methods for a historical analysis of grammar and lexicon (see above), for the study of speech acts (since Bühler 1934; Austin 1953; Searle 1969) or the knowledge-structuring role of text types, but it also permits to integrate fruitful approaches such as artefact theories, the historicity of patterns of conduct (Geertz 1973, 360–411 [1966]), the correlation of social practices in a habitus (Bourdieu 1980) and many other approaches. Only in this way can we succeed in following Sheldon Pollock's introductory definition and programme that philology is 'the discipline of making sense of texts'—a huge ambition!

Practice Theory not only helps to resolve the issues surrounding the definition of philology in a compelling manner, but also opens up options for further research. The archaeological context provides a key point of departure for reconstructing the practices associated with the creation and usage of cuneiform artefacts.

14 On the hermetic nature of Ancient Near Eastern Studies in this sense, see Selz 2010, 62–63.

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