4.4: Who Was Meant to See or Read the Texts

With the question of who was meant to see or read a given text, we are concerned with issues such as audience and accessibility of texts. The earliest proto-cuneiform texts were not designed to be read outside the administrative sphere, and so to the historian today they can be laconic and obtuse in their content. Even their language (or languages?) is unreachable through the distribution of incised signs, some 900 of them, that early scribes marked on the soft clay tablets with their stylis. Their most approachable component is the array of numerical systems employed to count and account for quantities of people, animals, and products as they made their way through the bureaucratic world (Chrisomalis 2010 provides a brilliant comparative study of the world’s systems of numerical notation, including those of ancient Mesopotamia).

How were cuneiform texts read? Charpin (2010: 20–22) proposes that in almost every case a cuneiform text would be read aloud either by a literate reader to him/herself or by a scribe to a non-literate listener, such as an official or royal recipient. Additionally, Charpin cites rare evidence that scribes might silently read texts to themselves as a means of rapidly checking their content. When we sit today in the British Museum study room and see the distinguished cuneiform scholars silently working their way through trays of broken clay tablets, perhaps we should encourage them occasionally to voice their readings aloud so that we might share in the aurality of the text and thereby gain an idea of how an ancient reader/listener might have encountered the written word (for a bold attempt at spoken Akkadian, by Irving Finkel of the British Museum, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13733615).