ROYAL LEXICOGRAPHY AT THE ASSYRIAN COURT

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Niek Veldhuis
Near Eastern Studies, UC Berkeley
veldhuis@berkeley.edu

The project Royal Lexicography: from Scholarship to Politics has created full digital access to the lexical texts (bilingual dictionaries, synonym lists, sign lists) from the library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, in order to enable and encourage research at the crossroads of ancient scholarship and politics.

The royal Library of Assurbanipal (668- ca 630 BCE) at Nineveh (modern Mosul) is the earliest systematic collection of the entire extent of scholarship of the time, and merits comparison with the Library of Alexandria several centuries later, or our own Library of Congress. The library, written in cuneiform on clay tablets, was abandoned when Nineveh was sacked in 612 BCE, to be discovered more or less intact by early excavators who explored the area in the mid-nineteenth century. The excavated palaces and temples not only yielded a comprehensive collection of traditional Mesopotamian knowledge, such as divination compendia, prayers, narratives, rituals, and lexical texts, but also royal correspondence and other archival material. The archival texts throw light on the workings of the Assyrian empire and on the actual use and function of ancient knowledge in decision-making at the Assyrian court. Assurbanipal's library, therefore, is not only the earliest comprehensive scholarly library in known history, it is also the only one from the ancient world that allows insight into the way scholarship was used for royal legitimation and policy making. Coherent publication of the library will allow questions such as: what role did ancient knowledge play in creating Assurbanipal's public persona? How did the king and his advisers manipulate knowledge for policy making? These questions proceed from mere translations and textual commentaries, to a social and political appreciation of a corpus of knowledge that was already ancient in Assyrian times.

The potential of this connection between traditional scholarly texts and the political documentation of the workings of the Assyrian empire has not been fully exploited so far, due to the scattered and incomplete publication of the scholarly texts. The Library was the first major discovery of cuneiform texts; because of its comprehensive nature the collection still holds a central place in the field of Assyriology. The sheer size of the collection (some 25,000 clay tablets and fragments), however, has prevented scholars from publishing the library in its entirety, so that small numbers of Assurbanipal Library texts, usually mixed with materials from other origins, may be found in a wide range of scholarly books and journals from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. The archival texts have been published systematically in the excellent series State Archives from Assyria (see http://oracc.org/saao), revolutionizing our understanding of the workings of the royal court and the role of scholars in political advising, but the handbooks that were used by these same scholars are still buried in countless publications and scattered throughout the scholarly literature.
The project Royal Lexicography, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and a Stahl Endowment grant, hired Jeremiah Peterson (Ph.D University of Pennsylvania) in order to create a website with images, editions and translations of all the lexical texts in the Assurbanipal collection. The results are available at http://oracc.org/dcclt/nineveh. The site, which presently contains editions of 975 cuneiform tablets, is a first step towards the comprehensive publication of the traditions of scholarship in this library. The British Museum, where the great majority of the Assurbanipal texts are stored, is working with other partners on the (electronic) publication of additional texts groups.

The site is also an experiment in translating lexical texts. Lexical texts preserve knowledge of the ancient Sumerian language (ancient already in Assyrian times!) by juxtaposing Sumerian words with Akkadian ones. They contain many rare, obscure, and artificial Sumerian words and thus provide many challenges to a translator. The example in the photograph is a list of wooden objects, with technical terms for parts of a chariot, parts of a wagon, various kinds of door, and parts of the door (including locks). Several of these words hardly ever appear outside of these types of dictionaries. Traditional publications of lexical compositions did not include translations and are very hard to use even for professional Assyriologists. The edition and translation of this text may be viewed at http://oracc.org/dcclt/nineveh/P370415.

Royal Lexicography is a component of the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (ORACC http://oracc.org) consortium, where it joins a variety of other digital cuneiform projects. All ORACC projects adhere to the open source/open access policy (Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike licensing) use the same set of standards, conventions, and tools and are thus mutually compatible. Four of these projects, in particular, provide additional context and thus enhance the value and scholarly usefulness of Royal Lexicography. The Knowledge and Power project (Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson, University College London and Cambridge; http://knp.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/) has made available letters, reports, and other documents from the Nineveh archives that illustrate the role of scholars and scholarship at the royal court. The juxtaposition of the Royal Lexicography and Knowledge and Power projects invites the type of questions that cross over from politics to scholarship and back. The Royal Inscriptions from the Neo-Assyrian Period project (Grant Frame and Steve Tinney, University of Pennsylvania; http://oracc.org/rinap) presents an extensive and very important group of texts that provide the main sources for our knowledge of the ideological programs of the monarchs of the time. The Geography of Knowledge in Assyria and Babylonia project (Eleanor Robson, Cambridge http://oracc.org/cams/gkab) has published four smaller first millennium scholarly libraries with the intention of furthering the understanding of these libraries in terms of the identity and the aspirations of their respective owners and collectors. This project, therefore, is closely related to ours in content and in approach, focusing on much smaller collections that are not directly related to royal ideology and policy making. The Geography of Knowledge in Assyria and Babylonia furnishes very valuable comparanda for understanding the role and function of lexicographic texts at the Assyrian royal court. Finally, Berkeley's Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (http://oracc.org/dcclt) is publishing lexical texts from all periods of cuneiform civilization. The historical depth of many of the lexical texts in Assurbanipal's library may easily be demonstrated through DCCLT.

All these projects, participants in the ORACC consortium, are accessible through the same portal and may be searched and manipulated in the same way.

The Stahl grant has helped to advance this new approach to the comprehensive publication of cuneiform material.