

Textual Archaeology of the Ancient Near East: Are We Doing It Wrong?

10th -13th December, 2015

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research



Introduction

The divide between archaeology and text is a familiar thorn in the side of ancient Near Eastern scholarship. While textual scholars are habitually dismissive of archaeological evidence which they see as ‘mute’ and therefore limited in informative value, material culture specialists are often mistrustful of written sources which they take to be severely biased and therefore non-representative of wider issues. The insistence to see the debate as a simple dichotomy between *text* and *artefact* marginalises the role of *image*, which must be considered on its own terms. As each side insists on evaluating the usefulness of the other’s data by its own standards, textual archaeology of the ancient Near East remains in an impasse. This impasse is chiefly perpetuated – and dialogues further impaired – by a logocentric tradition legitimising exclusive reliance on documentary sources and relegating material (and pictorial) evidence to a secondary role. The question is therefore not simply one of miscommunication but also of disparity.

Relevance

Numerous commentators have time and again pointed to the restrictive nature of the archaeological-textual divide. Especially in recent years, awareness of the value of utilizing archaeology and text together has become a visible trend rather than being confined to isolated efforts of a small number of scholars. Integrative approaches seem more conspicuous, and find varied means of expression. Problem-oriented research, for instance, can be seen to shift focus from singular to multiple strands of evidenceⁱ while large-scale long-term projects incorporate both textual and archaeological expertise.ⁱⁱ Most recently, the 61st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale was organised on the theme of “Text and Image” in a conscious attempt to draw Assyriologists and material culture specialists together.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, approaching cuneiform texts themselves as material culture grows as a focus of scholarly investigation in its own right.^{iv}

It is therefore a particularly good moment to take stock and evaluate textual archaeology of the Near East in terms of its theoretical underpinnings, and establish relevant methodological benchmarks. Central to this purpose is a self-reflexive consideration not only of *why* but also – and perhaps more importantly – *how* textual archaeology ought to be done within the particular confines of the ancient Near East. Cambridge’s strong tradition of bridging the archaeological-textual divide in the area will provide a unique backdrop for focused discussions on textual archaeology.

Challenges

As efforts towards textually informed archaeologies (and *vice versa*) appear to be gathering momentum, Postgate’s warning against hasty juxtapositions stands out with heightened relevance: “[W]hen one side decides to make a foray into strange territory, it is just that – a foray, almost a commando raid, which takes some booty, wrenches it from its background and then proceeds to exploit it in their home territory according to their own priorities.”^v If textual archaeology is to avoid collating decontextualized information or force square pegs into round holes, a critical awareness of both the possibilities as well as the limitations of each strand of evidence is crucial. The scope and limitations of each strand ought to be defined firmly and rigorously so that neither is overstretched or underexploited, but juxtaposed together in a balanced and appropriate fashion. The material and documentary records offer different resolutions of an already incomplete picture. This is, however, easier said than done.

An informed assessment of what information to incorporate into one’s research from ‘the other side’ and how to do so meaningfully requires at least basic skills of navigation outside one’s own field of expertise. Both archaeology and textual scholarship are very much internally heterogeneous fields, with multiple research orientations and area-specific

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modi operandi. On the one hand, the dizzying variety of textual corpora, which includes a wide range of documents not only in different genres but also in different languages and with chronological cultural idiosyncrasies of form as well as content, can be very discouraging for the archaeologist. For the textual specialist, on the other hand, the sheer volume of numerous categories of raw archaeological data, couched in increasingly technical discourse and with greater use of scientific methods of analysis, can seem impenetrable.

In view of the investment of time and focused effort – not to mention specialised training – necessary for even the preliminary tasks of classification, decipherment, cataloguing, and translation, the “division of labor between archaeologists and philologists/historians”^{vi} is not only justified, but simply necessary. This is all the more reason why, particularly at the broader interpretative stage, purposive dialogues between archaeological and textual fields of expertise ought to be promoted.

Scope

With this in mind, the conference aims to highlight a range of archaeological and textual methods and themes, from scientific analyses to interpretative syntheses, for a grounded understanding of the extent to which each side is receptive to the other’s data. Participants will be encouraged to address questions on the varying degrees of complementarity and compatibility between different kinds of textual, archaeological, and iconographic evidence. Dialogues will focus on how to integrate different archaeologies, texts, and images. What are, for example, the particular limitations of combining textual findings with the faunal record; or the challenges of integrating iconographic minutiae with the broad physical landscape – and to what extent can we overcome these? What are potential ‘false’ methodologies? How should the frameworks for establishing correspondence be modified as combinations change?

In a similar vein, the temporal and regional scope of the conference is intended to represent a wide range of issues. Speakers are encouraged to contextualize historical, current or anticipated obstacles for integrating archaeology and text within particular area specialisations. Within the ‘greater’ Near East, focused each area study on ancient Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Levant, and Iran reflects not only its idiosyncratic traditions of scholarship within a wider context, but also rely on varying degrees of data availability and/or accessibility. What may be a ubiquitous problem for one region and/or period may not be so in another – identifying idiosyncratic questions can thus help eliminate red herring problems and work towards real, targeted solutions.

Ancient Near Eastern scholarship hardly exists in a vacuum. Likewise, the miscommunication across the archaeological-textual divide is not unique only to it. No historical account of the origins and trajectory of the field can be separated from those of Classics and Egyptology, which, as text-oriented fields with inextricable links to archaeological discovery, are the closest sister disciplines from which Assyriology has received considerable influence. Archaeology’s vicissitudinous relationship with all three provides a crucial common denominator for establishing a meaningful comparative framework. What trends isolating modern cuneiform scholarship from archaeological research have been appropriated from the traditions of Classics, or modelled on Egyptological practice? By recognising such links, how can we develop counter-methodologies of integrating material and documentary evidence? What common challenges are shared by all three disciplines, and can the problems of one suggest solutions for another?

Further afield but of particular relevance is Historical Archaeology, which in many ways offers greater theoretical maturity in combining material and documentary evidence while ancient Near Eastern scholarship has a longer history of grappling with similar problems. What can Historical

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Archaeology's self-reflexivity offer ancient Near Eastern scholarship, and what can the diachronic trends of ancient Near Eastern scholarship teach Historical Archaeology? A comparative dialogue between these two fields would also promote mutual relevance of otherwise isolated praxes.

Stance

The divide between archaeology and text is not merely a methodological fault-line. Insofar as it fosters a readiness to accept singular points of reference for overarching accounts, or a tendency to compartmentalize contradictory interpretations without holding one strand of evidence to the scrutiny of others, the divide manifests as an inherently epistemological flaw. This flaw, however, must not be taken for granted – simply because the disconnect between archaeological practice and textual scholarship has a recognisably long history in ancient Near Eastern studies, it is not necessarily an inevitable, static feature of the discipline. Both the nature and extent of the archaeological-textual divide can shift and evolve over time, as justifications for widening or incentives for bridging the gap can change in accordance with research priorities being refined or reformulated.

Strengths or weaknesses of the dialogues between material- and text-based studies should not be reduced to the sum total of individual attitudes, but must be contextualised in terms of wider trends of how research, teaching, and training are structured across the humanities and social sciences. Equally important is to address issues of communication with the world beyond academia, such as the implications of popular culture and politics on how ancient Near Eastern studies are viewed and understood. Owing to its geographical scope, this is a field particularly fraught by complex politics both within and without the immediate confines of scholarly work, and it would be naïve to isolate the textual-archaeological gap from such dynamics. Especially in the current context of major transformations across the research map of the Middle East, as entire regions and therefore

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area specialisms shift in and out of focus, a purposive scrutiny of how textual archaeology – or the lack thereof – reflects the construction and consumption of knowledge, will be a highly rewarding direction to take.

Format

An ever-present pitfall for interdisciplinary efforts to bring together a range of expertise is that it is often difficult to go beyond the initial success of having physically gathered and eclectic group of specialists in the same venue. In a conscious attempt to encourage mutual engagement and generate meaningful discussion, the conference format incorporates not only invited speakers, but also respondents, likewise selected on the basis of representing a complementary range of specialisms. Pre-conference papers will be circulated to in advance to give the respondents a chance to prepare their responses. Each session will feature two speakers and one respondent, and conclude with a round-table discussion.

ⁱ See, for instance, E. Frood and R. Raja (eds.) *Redefining the Sacred: Religious Architecture and Text in the Near East and Egypt 1000 BC – AD 300*, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Most notably the University of Heidelberg's "Material Text Cultures: Materiality and Presence of the Scriptural in Non-Typographic Societies" (MTC) Project (www.materiale.textkulturen.de).

ⁱⁱⁱ See www.rai.unibe.ch.

^{iv} The British Museum's "Materialities of Assyrian Knowledge Production: Object Biographies of Inscribed Artefacts from Nimrud for Museums and Mobiles" (oracc.museum.upenn.edu/nimrud/) is a case in point for object-focused interest in cuneiform culture. Likewise, M. T. Rutz and M. Kersel (eds.), *Archaeologies of Text: Archaeology, Technology, and Ethics*. 2014 on the politics surrounding cuneiform texts as objects opens up a valid avenue of debate in the context of the looting in Iraq and Syria.

^v J. N. Postgate "Figure and Text in Mesopotamia: Match and Mismatch" in C. Renfrew and E. B. W. Zubrow (eds.), *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, 1994.

^{vi} R. Zettler, "Reconstructing the World of Ancient Mesopotamia: Divided Beginnings and Holistic History." *JESHO* 46/1, 2003.