

# Zero and Infinity: the Archives in Mesopotamia

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«Glory (or shame) to the brick !» wrote Prof. G. Cardascia in an article introducing legal assyriology to beginners<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Assyriologists are better off with the numerous tablets found in the deserts of the Near East, but this documentary wealth is not fully available nor completely usable, for many reasons.

One of them is the dispersion of the archives<sup>2</sup>.

By itself, a tablet gives a great amount of information, deriving from its content but also from its external aspect, the shape of its writing and the mention or the printing of seal(s). But a complete interpretation also requires knowledge of the archaeological context of its origin, and its possible connection to an archive.

Whether this tablet was kept with others or not, how it was stored, in which room or part of a building, all this enhances and enlightens the historical comment. What to do for instance with a list of people receiving various amounts of grain or silver? A. Jacquet shows here how the archivist point of view helps to rule out some hypotheses and suggest others. Such an approach implies

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1 CARDASCIA 1954 = 1995, 15: «Gloire (ou opprobre) à la brique !».

2 On the notion of archive in Mesopotamia, and the scientific and methodological questions it raises, see VEENHOF 1986, and especially his brilliant introduction to the volume (1-36).

awareness of the Mesopotamian practices of conservation and utilization of the archives.

The administrative services of palaces or temples on the one hand and those of the large households owning huge estates on the other hand worked in the same manner, though on a different scale: incomes and expenses were registered on notes, which were regularly copied on monthly or annual tablets; distributions of rations to employees and members of the family were carefully listed; some legal documents were kept, as well as letters dealing with political or administrative matters, or with current litigations in court.

Taken on their own, these texts may look very disparate and the link between them does not appear at first sight. For instance, we know that royal or religious officers in Babylonia<sup>3</sup> or in Syria<sup>4</sup> used to put together at home documents concerning their official functions along with their own family archives or those belonging to other citizens. Had we ignored their common provenience, the idea of bringing these texts together would have not occurred to us. Taking into consideration their material unity changes the way we look at the criteria of classification and internal organization of an archive, and leads us also to reconsider the relevance or the distinction between official and private sectors.

These pieces of information, which we consider crucial nowadays, were ignored or neglected for a long time. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the relentless competition between European cultural diplomacies in the Near East, the excavators – usually diplomats themselves – were basically concerned with the quantity of findings: they wanted to send to their museums as many artifacts and texts as possible, even if this meant damaging the sites, scattering the archives and destroying small pieces considered ordinary or uninteresting. Many precious indications have been lost during the harsh diggings of the archaeological pioneers. For instance, no one would pay attention to the sherds sometimes found along with the tablets because they were seen as common fragments of pottery; but they could have been the remains of storage jars, and could have given information about the archival methods of the Mesopotamians<sup>5</sup>. In the same vein, the precise *locus* where the texts were found and their disposition on the ground were sometimes omitted, when in fact these data inform us about the classification practices and the activities of a building. Finally, the political circumstances, the increasing number of illicit diggings and the setting up of the museum collections have often led to the dispersion of archives which originally formed a coherent set. The case of the family of Ea-ilūta-bāni, in the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>

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3 See for instance the texts from Dūr-Abiešuh, published by VAN LERBERGHE & VOET 2009, and the comments of D. CHARPIN, «Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Etudes» 142, 2011, 17-21, esp. 21.

4 See the archives of the diviner Zū-Bala and his family at Emar (DÉMARE-LAFONT 2008, 213-14) and the archives from the house of Urtenu at Ugarit (BORDREUIL & MALBRAN-LABAT 1995).

5 VEENHOF 1986, 13.

centuries B.C., is a good example thereof: their activities are reported during six generations in tablets kept in Jena, Istanbul, Oxford, Paris and at Yale University. A patient work aiming at regrouping the whole file was necessary in order to allow a global study of the matrimonial and economic strategies of this powerful family from Borsippa (modern Birs Nimrud, close to Babylon)<sup>6</sup>.

Mesopotamian families themselves sometimes had to face the scattering of their own archives, because of marriages, commercial activities or uprootings after wars or economic crises. The Assyrian merchants, for instance, often had two homes and carried their archives from one house to the other, as K. Veenhof explains here. In Old-Babylonian times, exiled people from Uruk, in Southern Mesopotamia, moved to the North and settled in Kish, bringing with them their documents<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, it sometimes happened that the tablets were destroyed, when they precluded to the drafting of official and monumental documents. Such is the case of the Medio-Babylonian *kudurrus* studied by S. Paulus in this volume: paradoxically, they testify to the existence of these “invisible” documents and raise the question of the purpose of such inscriptions engraved in the stone.

Be they available or virtual, archives are the frame within which most of the Mesopotamian sources have to be interpreted and, in this respect, the three following contributions illustrate several aspects among the numerous avenues to be further explored.

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6 JOANNÈS 1989.

7 CHARPIN 1986, 402-18.

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1995  
P. BORDREUIL & FL. MALBRAN-LABAT, *Les archives de la maison d'Ourtenou*, «CRAI» 139/2, 443-51.
- CARDASCIA 1954  
G. CARDASCIA, *Splendeur et misère de l'assyriologie juridique*, «Annales Universitatis Saraviensis» 3, 156-62 (reprinted in *Hommage à Guillaume Cardascia*, Méditerranées 3, 1995, 15-23).
- CHARPIN 1986  
D. CHARPIN, *Le clergé d'Ur au siècle d'Hammurabi (XIX<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles av. J.-C.)*, Hautes Etudes Orientales 22, Paris.
- DÉMARE-LAFONT 2008  
S. DÉMARE-LAFONT, *The King and the Diviner at Emar*, in L. D'ALFONSO, Y. COHEN & D. SÜRENHAGEN (eds.), *The City of Emar among the Late Bronze Age Empires – History, Landscape and Society*, Proceedings of the Konstanz Emar Conference 25-26.04.2006, AOAT 349, Münster, 207-17.
- JOANNÈS 1989  
F. JOANNÈS, *Archives de Borsippa: la famille Ea-ilûta-bâni. Etude d'un lot d'archives familiales en Babylonie du VIII<sup>e</sup> au V<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C.*, Hautes Etudes Orientales 25, Paris-Genève.
- VAN LERBERGHE & VOET 2009  
K. VAN LERBERGHE & G. VOET, *A Late Old Babylonian Temple Archive from Dūr-Abiešuh*, CUSAS 8, Bethesda.
- VEENHOF 1986  
K. R. VEENHOF (ed.), *Cuneiform Archives and Libraries. Papers read at the XXX<sup>e</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Leiden 1983, PIHANS 57, Leyde.