CHAPTER TWO

WRITING AND CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

Language is a universal human faculty\(^1\) but literacy is not. Writing is a relatively recent cultural invention that first appeared, as we know it, in the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia in the late fourth millennium.\(^2\) It is not known whether Sumerian cuneiform writing was an impetus for the development of Egyptian systems, and it is probable that they developed independently, as did the Chinese and Mayan writing systems (Michalowski, 1994:53). In all cases, the emergence of writing appears linked to increasing social, political, and economic complexity, and a concomitant requirement to administer and control the transfer of commodities (Cooper, 2004:72; see also Nissen, Damerow & Englund, 1993): settled populations with agrarian economies produced a surplus of goods, which resulted in an increase in trade. However, as Cooper (2004:94) has noted, literacy is not an obligatory marker for complex societies or civilizations.

The cuneiform corpus provides a uniquely rich record of the early uses to which writing was put, largely because of the durable material on which it was written: clay tends to outlast papyrus and other, softer materials. The necessity for record keeping and the relative stability brought by urbanization allowed both the preservation of written records and the elaboration and development of the writing system. From the earliest texts of the archaic period we can observe how written texts evolved within the literate tradition of the cuneiform scribes.

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\(^1\) See below, 2.2.3, and Chapter 3, this volume, for discussion.

The cuneiform scribal tradition lasted more than three millennia, around thirty-four centuries. Some of the lexical series survived in recognizable form for thousands of years within this tradition. Through the literate practices associated with their profession, scribes preserved the cultural heritage of Mesopotamia and the accumulated knowledge of that culture. The stability of textual forms and content across generations of scribes and centuries of tradition has been widely attested, and several factors may have influenced this.

The institutions of scribal training, such as the scribal school or edubba, were a major stabilizing factor, as the copying of texts was the primary mode of instruction. A conscious concern for the preservation of older texts, which the scribes recognized as containing important academic knowledge, also fostered conservatism and traditionalism (Veldhuis, 1997:80), as did the high regard in which the Sumerian language and traditions were held. For millennia after it had ceased to be a spoken language, Sumerian maintained a status akin to that of Latin in the Western intellectual tradition (Nissen, Damerow & Englund, 1993). The elevated social status and important administrative role of the scribes also led to a sense of exclusivity being associated with the scribal tradition.

Obtaining a scribal education was no small accomplishment, and the difficulties inherent in mastering the cuneiform system, with its complex signs and multiple phonetic readings, ensured a lengthy period of scribal education (Pearce, 1995:2270). Scribal education was central to the administration of the state, but it is not clear whether influence was exerted on scribal education by a central authority or whether priestly families and smaller schools were more important in this regard. Finally, and of primary concern to our discussion in this chapter, writing itself was a stabilizing factor because of the permanence of representation that it allowed.

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4 Note, however, that there were periods of change; see Civil, 1995, and also Veldhuis, 1997.