

Two Sides of the Same Tablet:

The Timelessness of Teaching, Writing, and Creativity



Anna Luurtsema

University of Michigan

aluurts@umich.edu

From afar, the scene is immediately recognizable to the modern eye: a teacher, sitting across from his student, jots down four words for him to copy. The student's penmanship is sloppy compared to that of his instructor, who critiques him and adjusts his grip on the writing implement. Upon closer examination, they are not writing in a modern language but in ancient Sumerian, indecipherable to the untrained eye, and the words themselves—“beer,” “to go,” “mash,” and “arable land”—are unconventional choices for a writing exercise (“Round School Tablet”). Most strikingly, they do not use a pen or pencil but a wedge-tipped reed, and a circular, unfired clay tablet takes the place of lined notebook paper. Four thousand years separate this lesson from modern classrooms, yet it feels familiar, mundane. Against all odds, the round school tablet and its cuneiform inscription has survived to find itself on display at the Kelsey Museum of Archeology, a testament to the enduring power and relevance of writing and education.

Before paper or papyrus, there was clay. Since the invention of writing five thousand years ago, clay tablets were used to record business transactions, keep administrative records, and educate young scribes. One of the first examples of writing dates to around 3200 BCE: a small rectangular clay tablet imprinted with circles and wedges, recording a transaction of grain (Schmandt-Besserat & Wright, 2014). Malleable, multipurpose, and easy to produce in large quantities, clay was the ideal medium for writing. Shaped into a tablet, it could be baked in a kiln to serve as a permanent record, or it could be moistened and recycled. Conveniently for archaeologists, the fires that devastated ancient buildings often preserved unfired tablets that otherwise would have been lost to history. The tablets were inscribed with a type of writing known as cuneiform, meaning wedge-shaped, after the stylus that was introduced in the mid-3rd millennium BCE (Cooper *et al.*, 2010). Over time, the simple circles, dashes, and wedges that

represented quantities of a given material were replaced by pictographs—literal images of objects. Pictographs soon gave way to the more complicated phonological and syllabic writing, where each symbol represented a sound, word, or part of a word.

Similar to scratch paper, the round school tablet on display at the Kelsey was never meant to survive four thousand years. Though there are many varieties of cuneiform tablets, round school tablets were used in the instruction of scribes during the Third Dynasty of Ur, located in modern day Iraq, from 2112 to 2004 BCE. The major city of Kippur was an epicenter of education, and thousands of round clay tablets were uncovered during archaeological excavations at the turn of the 20th century (Robson, 2001; Michalowski, 2003). Round school tablets commonly featured only a few lines of writing; larger tablets were used for advanced writing exercises or mathematical calculations (Falkowitz, 1983; Proust, 2011). The teacher would inscribe a few words into the soft clay, which the student would copy at the bottom of the tablet or on the other side. Like modern English, they wrote left-to-right and top-to-bottom, and under the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Sumerian was the primary written language, although it began to be replaced orally by Akkadian during this period (Hattori, 2002). Though limited both by the size and content, much can be gleaned from the inscriptions on round school tablets. On some, the student's writing is nearly indistinguishable from the teacher's, signaling a particularly skilled pupil, while others are imprinted with fingernail marks and star-shaped scribbles (Falkowitz, 1983). Boredom, it seems, is an enduring phenomenon.

The education of scribes was prioritized during the Third Dynasty of Ur, as scribes played an essential role in society. Literacy was rare, even among kings and members of the upper class, so scribes were relied upon to keep record of events and transactions. Due to the nature and privilege of the position, the required education to become a scribe was reserved for

talented sons of bureaucrats, priests, and businessmen, though occasionally an exception was made for a royal daughter (Michalowski, 2003; Meier, 1991). Boys were trained from a young age at home by their fathers or in a small school known as an *eduba*, which in Sumerian means “tablet house” (Robson, 2001, p. 44). The curriculum contained both oral and written components, and students were expected to memorize and reproduce entire poems and vocabulary lists, as well as apply complex grammar and mathematics (Crisostomo, 2016). Round tablets were just one type of tablet utilized in *edubas*; teachers created a variety in different shapes and sizes, each suited to a specific purpose. While round tablets were helpful for memorizing a few words or phrases, larger ones were used to copy lists or record mathematical tables, and others still were split into two columns, like an open book, to record lengthy sections of prose (Robson, 2001). Upon completing their education, scribes were employed in various contexts as accountants, administrators, mathematicians, and secretaries (Lucas, 1979). Some even returned to *edubas* to educate future generations of scribes.

Despite the prestige and intensity of their training, scribes tend to be overlooked in history; after all, their job was to record events, not to participate in them. Yet, the importance of the role played by scribes cannot be overstated. Kings desired to present themselves tactfully to their subjects, and as their mouthpiece, it was the responsibility of the royal scribes to enact their vision. Under the direction of Ur-Namma, the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, scribes carved the first law codes in history onto stelas—freestanding stone pillars covered with cuneiform text and, often, images of the king in association with gods (Evans, 2003). Mesopotamian law codes commonly prescribed specific punishments and resolutions for various crimes and issues, ranging from robbery to divorce to property rights (Potts, 2003). As Ur-Namma sought to portray his rule as merciful and liberating, his scribes also included a

section about his piety and kindness. Far from the round school tablets of their youth, scribes were commissioned by later kings—most famously by Hammurabi of Babylon—to create similar monumental stelas in order to perpetuate a sense of order and justice in the kingdom. To further legitimize their rule and, more importantly, appease their gods, kings also ordered the construction of monumental towers known as ziggurats, which required the labor of thousands of men and careful organization by scribes to complete (Wiseman, 1972; Evans, 2003). In addition to keeping daily records, scribes maintained ledgers, ensured workers were paid the correct amount of rations, and created annual progress reports (Lamberg-Karlovsky & Tosi, 2003). Though not as glamorous as managing the construction of a monument for the gods, scribes were also critical to the day-to-day management of a kingdom. Some 40,000 cuneiform tablets found in the city of Puzrish-Dagan from the Third Dynasty of Ur are connected to the system of taxation and redistribution created by King Shulgi, son of Ur-Namma (Evans, 2003). The tablets record commonplace events such as the sale of animal products, payments received in the form of oils or precious stones, and the delivery of livestock to a temple for sacrifice. These highly detailed documents preserve not only the intricacies of an ancient economy, but also the fundamental role scribes played in its running.

The contributions of scribes offer just one window into ancient Mesopotamian society; returning to the cuneiform inscription on the round school tablet at the Kelsey can provide greater insight into their history and values. As children today are taught to write using relevant words such as “happy,” “dog,” and “play,” a teacher in an *eduba* would have selected practical options for a short exercise—in this case, “beer,” “mash,” “to go,” and “arable land.” To succeed in their positions, scribes needed to be well-versed in both the administrative and vernacular languages, and beer played an important part in both spheres. Beer was glorified in poetry and

art, attached to myths about their gods, used to pay workers' wages, and shared between friends (Katz & Voigt, 1986). In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written during the Third Dynasty of Ur, it was even a "civilizing" force: upon drinking seven jugs of beer, Enkidu "splashed his shaggy body with water / and rubbed himself with oil, and turned into a human" (Carnahan, 1998, p. 8). Both ancient beer and bread were produced from a thick mash of cereal grain, also known as gruel, which was left to ferment for days to weeks. In time, bread and beer evolved as a more palatable way to consume grain, which was difficult to digest raw. Beer is intimately connected to arable land, another concept inscribed in the round school tablet, as its origin dates back to the Neolithic transition, when people began to exchange their nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life for a more sedentary one. Some archaeological evidence even suggests that beer—not bread—was the original impetus for cereal domestication (Braidwood *et al.*, 1953). Given its history and the central role it played in Mesopotamian society, it is understandable that it would have been one of the first words taught to young scribes.

Similarly, arable land was a sufficiently important concept to warrant a place on the round school tablet. Though agriculture developed independently around the world, producing a variety of crops, the common denominator in its adoption was an abundance of arable land. A multitude of reasons were responsible for the transition to sedentism, but it is undeniable that without it, inventions such as beer production, writing, and institutions like the *eduba* would not have occurred. As more and more people settled, land became increasingly valuable, and for the first time in history, it could be owned. The idea of property, alongside the growing volume and complexity of transactions, required a sophisticated system of writing. Hammurabi's Code, written in 1771 BCE, included several laws pertaining to property, such as Law 25: "If fire break out in a house, and some one who comes to put it out cast his eye upon the property of the owner

of the house, and take the property of the master of the house, he shall be thrown into that self-same fire” (King, 2008). A number of other laws prescribed specific punishments for stealing someone’s property, but they also detailed rewards that should be given for transforming waste land into arable land. As the empire expanded, more transactions occurred through the taxation and tribute of a growing population, which necessitated the training of more scribes; during the Old Babylonian period, which included Hammurabi’s reign, *edubas* became more common. Over the next thousand years, empires rose and fell in Mesopotamia, but cuneiform tablets—including round school tablets—remained in use as a simple, recyclable way to educate scribes. Thus, indirectly, the utilization of arable land spurred on many of the cultural advancements that characterized early societies, including writing.

Cuneiform, like most technologies, was replaced in due course by a different writing system and the tablets were discarded or repurposed, eventually making their way to join the archaeological record. A series of excavations in the late 1800s under the Ottoman Empire uncovered caches of tablets in the floors and walls of houses, giving a literal meaning to the word *eduba*— “tablet house.” Some of these tablets came to be in the possession of Edgar J. Banks, who was, among other things, an archaeologist, film maker, and the inspiration for Indiana Jones. After purchasing thousands of tablets from the Ottoman Empire, he sold them off to private collectors, universities, and museums, including the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (Freudenthal, 2021). Today, the round school tablet sits on display at the Kelsey beside several other cuneiform tablets purchased from Banks, but it is tainted by a number of ethical issues surrounding the tablet’s acquisition. It could be argued that the Ottoman Empire had no right to excavate or sell the tablets in the first place, given that the native people of Iraq did not consent to such an invasion. Next, they came to be in possession of Edgar J. Banks, whose tactics to sell

the tablets were shady at best. After exporting them from their country of origin without permission, he fabricated a sense of urgency by telling potential buyers to act quickly because he had other interested parties. To attract a wider range of collectors, he also touted his credentials as an explorer and archaeologist—though he only went on one dig, from 1903 to 1905 (Freudenthal, 2021). Banks became something of a traveling salesman, guest lecturing and selling tablets at universities across the country, doing whatever was necessary to turn a profit. Thousands of clay tablets remain scattered around the United States; though some are available to the public, it is assumed the majority are hidden away in boxes, unlikely to be seen or studied again due to the ongoing curation crisis.

After surviving four thousand years in the earth and the handling of Edgar J. Banks and the Ottoman Empire, the round school tablet continues to tell its story. On display at the Kelsey, the tablet is able to be studied and appreciated by the public. Not only a reminder of the long-standing relevance of writing and the transformative power of education, the tablet speaks to our unique capacity as humans to document our lives, pass on traditions, and affirm our very existence. Though much has changed, much remains the same. We teach our children to read and write. We crave organization, doze off in lectures, and build tall buildings just to prove to the gods that we can. However, like the two sides of a tablet—the teacher’s inscription on one side, and on the other, the student’s—there is a duality to humanity, an aptitude for both good and bad. Writing, then, signifies not only a turning point in history, but a case study in what it means to be human. Given this legacy and the dishonesty surrounding its acquisition, the round school tablet deserves recognition. The current exhibit could be enhanced by adding a mirror component, making the inscription on the reverse side visible. Providing additional context about cuneiform,

tablets, and scribes could also be helpful in augmenting the experience of guests to the Kelsey and ensuring the tablet's historical importance is acknowledged.

At first glance, the round school tablet is just an interesting piece of clay, scratched up and small enough to hold in the palm of your hand. In actuality, the tablet represents a chapter from one of the most pivotal periods in history. Cuneiform, the earliest form of writing, was more than a collection of symbols or a complex record system; like the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture, it signified the potential of the human race. As humans, we have the unique abilities to create, teach, and inspire. From dust, we dream up entire cities. We drink beer with friends. We doodle in the margins of clay tablets and notebooks alike. From marveling at an old slab of clay engraved with wedge-shaped markings, to building museums that celebrate the cultures of past peoples, we simultaneously learn from history and innovate for the future. Like scribes in an *eduba*, we instill our culture and values into future generations, and though systems of education have existed for thousands of years, we embrace that much remains to be discovered. Preserved in clay, papyrus, and paper, we have a documented history of acquiring knowledge, expressing emotions, and seeking justice; indeed, to examine some of our best attributes as a species, we need only look to the classroom, ancient or modern.

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