

# The Hands of the Scribes in Antiquity



## Description du workshop sur les scribes

In the recent years, research has brought new insight into the work of scribes in different geographical areas and periods. A new discussion across periods and spaces seems a welcome opportunity to explore the similarities and dissimilarities in the social position and the professional habits of scribes of all periods of Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian history. Prosopography, palaeography, linguistics, anthropology, and social network analysis provide invaluable tools for the analysis of the activities of scribes and their socio-cultural context. They allow us to revisit the studies previously carried out about this socio-professional group. Based on the investigation of administrative, economic, and legal texts as well as letters, from the Old Assyrian to the Hellenistic period, this workshop aims to utilise the above-mentioned

approaches to study the social position of scribes and their professional practices diachronically.

## **The hands of the scribes in Antiquity: scribal practices and the social place of scribes from the Old Assyrian to the Hellenistic Period**

**Paris – 21-22 March 2022**

**Nanterre University**

**Amphithéâtre Max Weber (Max Weber building)**

### **MONDAY 21st March**

**14h15-14h30** Welcome and brief introduction by Marie Young and Véronique Pataï

**14h30-15h** Wiebke Beyer (Hamburg University)

**A Study on Wedges: The Variability of Old Assyrian Cuneiform Signs**

**15h-15h30** Anita Fattori (São Paulo University / Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne University)

**Family Lexicon: Language and Gender in the Old Assyrian Letters**

**15h30-16h Coffee Break**

**16h-16h30** Véronique Pataï (Department of Near Eastern Antiquities at the Louvre, Paris)

**A prosopographical investigation of the scribes of Nuzi: The case of <sup>d</sup>AK.DINGIR.RA son of Sîn-napšir**

**16h30-17h** Baudouin Luzianovich (Sorbonne University)

**Knowledgeable Royal Servants: The case of king's scribes in New Kingdom Egypt (1470-1069 B.C.E)**

### **TUESDAY 22nd March**

**10h00-10h30** Maarja Seire (Leiden University)

**The Scribes of Itti-Marduk-balāṭu**

**10h30-11h** Paulina Pikulska (Warsaw University)

**College Scribes of Sippar and their scribal activity**

**11h00-11h15** Coffee Break

**11h15-11h45** Marie Young (Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne University / Heidelberg University)

**The Sîn-lēqi-unninni, the Ekur-zakir families and the writing of contracts in the Hellenistic Uruk Society**

**11h45-12h15** Robert Kade (Humboldt University of Berlin)

**The many hands on the kalamos: A survey through the scribal habits of Graeco-Roman Egypt**

**12h15-12h30** Conclusion by Marie Young and Véronique Pataï

**12h30-14h** Lunch time

For online access to the conference, please contact:  
scribesinnanterre@gmail.com

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## **Abstracts**

**Monday 21<sup>st</sup> March, 14h15-17h**

**A Study on Wedges:**

**The Variability of Old Assyrian Cuneiform Signs**

**Wiebke Beyer**

Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures  
Cluster of Excellence 'Understanding Written Artefacts'  
Universität Hamburg

It appears that during the Old Assyrian period, most of the merchants – and their wives – were literate. At least to a certain degree. They had to communicate over long distances,

search for specific contracts and debt-notes in their abundant archives and manage their affairs while *en route*. Learning cuneiform script during that time was probably not as difficult since the sign repertoire was rather small, and the necessary signs for a simple text were even smaller. However, many of the sign forms were not standardised. This gave the scribes a lot of leeway in the execution of the signs, especially with regard to the number of wedges as well as their position.

This paper focuses on the many variants and variations of the Old Assyrian cuneiform signs and the individual influences of the scribes. Which elements of a sign could be changed, where can similarities be found among the signs and which details can be attributed to the different scribes? Furthermore, I would like to show that such observations also give us some insight into writing traditions, palaeography in its classical meaning as the development of a script, but also in individual writing development, family traits and educational matters.

## **Family Lexicon: Language and Gender in the Old Assyrian Letters**

**Anita Fattori**

Universidade de São Paulo and Université Paris 1 – Panthéon  
Sorbonne

Language cannot be reduced to a medium of human interactions. Language is a channel through which individual learn to make sense of their world *around* and a conceptual tool they can think *with*, shaping and transforming the reality they live *in*. At the beginning of the II millennium BCE, there was an intensification of trade networks between Anatolia and Mesopotamia. The engagement of Old Assyrian families in this long-distance commerce led to a reconfiguration of kinship dynamics. Cuneiform letters were constantly exchanged over

large geographical expanses as merchant families had to deal with the practicalities of trading activities in an everyday basis. These very long-range connections, notably the flow of information exchange among individuals within and between families over different geographical locations, may suggest literacy was a widespread phenomenon among members of merchant families, including wives, sisters, and daughters. This notion is in line with what recent studies have been proposing, that literacy in the Old Assyrian period is not exclusive to formal education training (i.e. scribal schools), but it can be also framed within family contexts. In this paper I will apply the theoretical and methodological insights of linguistic anthropology to get a better understanding of the relationship between language and gender. The analysis of letters sent and received by women from the same family can provide us some clues about how they insert themselves into the reality they were part of and what contextual meanings emerge from a given style of written communication. Women from Assyrian merchant families created through language forms of belonging.

## **A Prosopographical Investigation of the Scribes of Nuzi: The Case of dAK.DINGIR.RA Son of Sîn-napšir**

**Véronique Pataï**

Département des antiquités orientales du musée du Louvre,  
Paris

Approximately 6 000 tablets were discovered in Nuzi and nearly 300 scribes produced this documentation. In order to tame this large corpus, I created a methodology for the prosopographical investigation of the scribes of Nuzi through the study of 12 scribes who worked for a woman, Tulpun- naya. Thanks to several criteria, such as the contacts of the scribes (employers, witnesses, judges), the cities where they are active, their writing styles or even their seals and, in some

cases, their handwriting, it was possible to reach a more precise understanding of their professional practices.

The scribes in question wrote only a small number of tablets for Tulpun-naya, 37 tablets, but they were employed by other people. and thus, the corpus analyzed includes 460 tablets in total.

The prosopographical study of these scribes highlighted the presence of many homonymous scribes. By comparing the above criteria, it was possible to resolve most of the cases of homonymous scribes and to define more precisely their corpus of texts. Furthermore, it was also possible to bring to light the delivery of scribal instruction between scribes of the same family through several generations.

In the absence of any dating information, the attestation of wealthy Nuzian families members in the documents written by the scribes permitted to place the texts in a relative chronology. This approach allowed to observe some evolutions in the careers of the scribes.

The case of <sup>d</sup>AK.DINIGIR.RA, son of Sîn-napšir, explores the difficulties and possibilities of prosopographical investigation in the study of the scribes of Nuzi and how this approach has provided a more precise understanding of their professional practices.

## **Knowledgeable Royal Servants: The Case of the King's Scribes in New Kingdom Egypt (1470-1069 B.C.E)**

**Baudouin Luzianovich**  
Université de la Sorbonne

From the reign of Hatshepsut onwards, the title of the king's scribe reappeared in the sources and was displayed

ostentatiously by many dignitaries in their monumental discourse. The title was conferred on officials who were noticed by the king, presumably because of their scribal skills at the beginning of their careers. Although king's scribes can be defined as king's servants who were well-versed in the use of writing, the diversity of their attributions reflects a diversity of profiles. Thus, the title does not cover a specific function but seems to be linked to several functions, such as director of works, royal tutor, steward, etc. Nevertheless, the king's scribes were among the most important positions within the pharaonic institutions and were defined by a common core, which is the display of their writing skills and their scholarship.

This paper will present a glimpse at the very first observations made in the course of a doctoral research. Firstly, I will focus on the king's scribes' trajectories and life-path in order to highlight their training, their careers, and fields of knowledge, using their monumental discourse as source material. Despite the diversity of their profiles, the king's scribes all do stage their scribal practices, scholarship, and a special relationship with the king. It is especially illustrated by the so-called "scribe statues" showing them writing or reading a manuscript, but also by their tombs, stelae, and all kind of monuments. Thus, their monumental discourse can be understood as the theater of a codified *self- presentation* formalizing a definition, at several levels (individual, family, social group), of what being a king's scribe is. This definition is deeply correlated with a position within society and the universe. Thus, this monumental discourse offers a rich material to explore the question of the social position of the upper part of the literate spectrum.

**Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 10h-12h30**

## **The Scribes of Itti-Marduk-balāṭu**

**Maarja Seire**

Leiden University

More than 10,000 private archival documents have survived from the Neo-Babylonian period, containing information regarding economic, social, and legal life. These clay tablets mention the contract parties, the witnesses, and the scribe of the document. The frequent use of family names from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards makes it easier to identify people and trace their activities. Among the elite of Babylonia, many businessmen were literate, yet others wrote documents for them. For this workshop, I will analyse the “client-scribe” relationships of Itti-Marduk-balāṭu, the son of Nabû-ahhē- iddin from the Egibi family, who was one of the main actors in the Egibi archive. The Egibi archive with its Nūr-Sîn annex is one of the largest private archives from the Neo-Babylonian period. At present day, it contains more than 1,750 documents and covers five generations of business activities. In addition to this, the archive sheds light on matters related to property ownership, family life, and disputes. Therefore, this archive enables studying relationships in detail. Itti-Marduk-balāṭu himself is attested in ca. 350 documents, written by more than 200 different scribes. Who were the individuals who wrote tablets for this literate businessman? What was their relationship to the persons mentioned in the tablets they wrote? Furthermore, can the context allow us to discern social and legal conventions regarding who functioned as a scribe? For studying these relationships, I am using social network analysis. While the results of this case study reflect on social frameworks, they also demonstrate how cuneiform literacy was applied to writing legal documents. These insights offer new avenues on understanding professionalism.

# College Scribes of Sippar and Their Scribal Activity

Paulina Pikulska

Warsaw University

Neo-Babylonian scribes who wrote documents for temples had their hands full of work. They were tasked to record loans, taxes, payments, letter orders, leases, trials, lists of goods, and many more on clay tablets. Almost all of these types of texts can be found in the uncovered temple archives of Ebabbar in Sippar (modern Abu Habbah in Iraq), which are the main source material for my research and this paper.

Among the scribes of Ebabbar, especially one group stands out: so-called College Scribes (akad.

*tupšar Ebabbar/bīti*). They appear to be part of the upper echelon of temple administration. A.C.V.M. Bongenaar placed them “immediately beneath the temple administrator (*šangû*) of Sippar and the resident (*qīpu*) of Ebabbar” and John MacGinnis called them “the backbone of the administration, active in all spheres of the temple economy”.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I take a closer look at the scribal aspect of the activity of the College Scribes of Ebabbar. I demonstrate that they not only commissioned other scribes to write down their orders and transactions, but they also wrote some of them by themselves.

1 Bongenaar, A.C.V.M, *The Neo-Babylonian Ebabbar Temple at Sippar: its Administration and its Prosopography*, Leyde, Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1997, p. 56 and MacGinnis, J., *Letter Orders from Sippar and the Administration of the Eabbara in the Late-Babylonian Period*, Poznań, Bonami, 1995. p.119.

# **The Sîn-lēqi-unninni, the Ekur-zakir Families and the Writing of Contracts in the Hellenistic Uruk Society**

**Marie Young**

Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne / Universität Heidelberg

The regular and irregular excavations of the city of Uruk have brought to light a documentation of about 700 legal and administrative cuneiform tablets which constitutes a major source of information for our understanding of the political, economic, and cultural situation of the city between its conquest by Alexander in 331 BCE and the destruction of the Bīt Rēš and Irigal temples ca. 100 BCE. This documentation was written by the temple's scholars of Sumero-Akkadian culture, who still mastered cuneiform in a world where Greek had gradually become established as the language of administration. About thirty scribes are the authors of this legal and administrative documentation and this paper will examine the place of the scribes, belonging to the Sîn-lēqi-unninni and Ekur-zakir families, in late Babylonian society and will reflect on the status of cuneiform contracts in the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and in the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. The aim is to examine the scribal practices of these professionals, the transmission of these habits, and the link that may exist between their activity as copyists of literary and scholarly texts and their activity as contract scribes. Based on case studies, this paper examines whether it is possible to see the same individual writing characteristics in literary and scholarly texts as in legal texts, and what challenges this documentation raises for conducting a palaeographic analysis of these scribes' hands.

# **The Many Hands on the Kalamos: A Survey Through the Scribal Habits of Graeco-Roman Egypt**

**Robert Kade**

Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

The Greek conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE had a severe impact on the local scribal practices. In contention with the Egyptian scripts and languages, Ancient Greek gradually became the main language of administration, which eventually led to the decline of the former in favour of alphabetic Coptic beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. While our information is scarce on the actual procedure and curriculum of the scribal education in Graeco-Roman Egypt, it is possible to acquire some insights through the borrowing of foreign terminology, as well as the varying script conventions applied in the temple scriptoria.

By accessing the material gathered for my PhD thesis as well as recent research conducted on scribal habits, I will give an overview on the dealings of the scribes with the traditional ways vs. the adaption to Graeco-Roman rule including some insights on their (daily) practices. My lecture will center on material from the Fayum region in Egypt as a case study, one of the richest centers in the late religious and scribal landscape. The ideal climate conditions allowed for the preservation of an exceptional amount of papyri and ostraca in this area. The diversity of finds allows for a comparison of several major cities, among them Dimê, Tebtynis, Narmouthis, and Oxyrhynchus, yielding a set of particularities and individual strategies in coping with the change of language and the writing systems.

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