

The Disappearance of Writing Systems

Dedicated to the memory of Jeremy Black (1951–2004)

The Disappearance of Writing Systems
Perspectives on Literacy and Communication

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Postscript

Redundancy Reconsidered: Reflections on David Brown's Thesis

Jerrold Cooper

David Brown, drawing upon his profound knowledge of late astronomical-astrological cuneiform texts, has pointed out that the latest of these, from the late first century BC and the first century AD, are unsophisticated products that are more aberrant than I had realized (in Houston *et al.* 2003: 454–5). He rightly correlates this reduced scribal competence with the fact that production of tablets with compositions from the 'stream of tradition', which provided the fodder for scribal education for millennia, ceased around the middle of the first century BC, meaning that traditional cuneiform schooling ceased then as well. Soon after, higher quality astronomical texts disappeared and the only cuneiform texts that were still inscribed are the products of unschooled astrologers who continued to practise their craft late into the first century AD.

Why had cuneiform persisted and even flourished in the last centuries BC, resisting a variety of political, economic and linguistic pressures that might be expected to have led to a much earlier demise? Brown suggests that it was the cuneiform records of centuries of celestial observation, as well as the horoscopic techniques developed by cuneiform astronomers, that assured the continued utility of cuneiform. This, together with the inertia inherent in any scribal culture, facilitated the transmission of cuneiform in an age when there was no longer an Akkadian mother-tongue community, and nearly all aspects of life were documented in alphabetic scripts. But in the first century BC, from which Babylonian astronomical and horoscopic methods are first attested in Greek and Demotic, demonstrating that these methods had spread beyond the cuneiform community, cuneiform schooling—that is, the institutional support of cuneiform study and learning—ceased. After a couple of generations in which

individual astrologers probably passed on what cuneiform knowledge was necessary to perform their one narrow task, the writing of cuneiform ceased altogether.

Brown is certainly right, but his thesis raises two important questions. First, as he himself has summarized so beautifully, the Babylonian astronomical techniques that reached their apogee in the Seleucid period around 200 BC originated a half millennium earlier, around 700 BC, when prediction became an all-important skill to the astronomers who practised astrological divination in the service of the Assyrian kings (Brown 2003). Only later, beginning in the fifth century BC when Babylonia was an Achaemenid Persian province, were predictive techniques used to calculate personal horoscopes (Brown 2003: 10–11).

Traditional Mesopotamian astrological divination was concerned with affairs of state and the well-being of the king (e.g. Pongratz-Leisten 1999). Yet there is no evidence that the Achaemenid kings or their Seleucid and Parthian successors communicated with the cuneiform astronomers who by then were attached to the temples of the major traditional Babylonian urban centres.¹ It is telling that, in contrast to the many hundreds of inscriptions of Assyrian and Babylonian kings testifying to royal construction and support of temples, after 539 BC we have only a few building inscriptions of Cyrus and one of Antiochus I (281–261 BC). Persian and Greek rulers seem not to have been great patrons of Babylonian temples or of their personnel.²

Horoscopic astrology, in contrast to traditional astrological divination, was concerned with the destiny of the individual. If the income from horoscopy provided the incentive, as Brown suggests, for the temples to maintain the elaborate educational enterprise needed to train scribes in cuneiform, then it is surprising that only a few dozen cuneiform horoscopes survive. The absence or paucity of documentation in both instances—for royal consultation of temple astronomers and for individual horoscopes—could easily be explained by the accidents of recovery, but should be kept in mind nonetheless.

The second question raised by the notion that cuneiform was kept alive in large part for its astronomical and astrological value has to do with the temple cult. Among the Standard Babylonian texts preserved from the fifth through first centuries BC are many liturgical compositions and temple rituals, and it has always been thought that, like Latin or Hebrew or Arabic in their respective religious traditions, the ancient Sumerian and Akkadian languages were essential to the Babylonian temple cult. But if the successful transmission of Babylonian astronomical and astrological techniques to vernacular languages led to the abandonment of Sumero-Akkadian learning in the first century BC, then the Babylonian cults and temples, which by all accounts persisted at least into the third century AD, must have also been using the vernacular by the first century BC, and probably somewhat earlier.³ That the vernacular was used in the cult, and that it was Aramaic and not Greek, is strongly suggested by

the following: when, at the end of the third century BC, the highest official in Seleucid Uruk, who bore both an Akkadian name, Anu-uballit, and a Greek name, Cephalon, rebuilt the temple of Ishtar, he had his double name inscribed neither in Akkadian cuneiform nor in Greek, but in Aramaic, on the glazed brick façade of the temple's cult niche (Sherwin-White 1987: 24).⁴ Any Aramaic liturgical texts would have been written on perishable materials and, like Aramaic documents in general from Babylonia, would not have survived.⁵

The abandonment of traditional cuneiform education in the mid-first century BC, then, ushered in a period of a century and a half or so during which cuneiform writing was a niche technology practised by astrologers with diminished scribal competence, but I think Brown would agree that none of the latest cuneiform astronomical-astrological texts are the products of 'semi-literates'.⁶ Brown has set forth a very plausible description of how and why 'fewer and fewer students ... studied cuneiform, until finally there were none and the script community died with its last members' (Houston *et al.* 2003: 456).

Notes

1. For Classical traditions regarding the warnings given to Alexander by Babylonian diviners, see Spek 2003: 332–5.
2. Two building inscriptions from the Rēš-temple in Uruk recording building by the local governor 'for the life' of the Seleucid kings (Linssen 2004: 107–8, 125) do not suggest royal initiation or support of the rebuilding, but rather the opposite (cf. McEwen 1981: 184), and the temples in Babylon seem to finance their own repairs and reconstruction under the Seleucid's Arsacid successors (Spek 1985: 547). For the project of rebuilding the Marduk temple precinct in Babylon begun under Alexander, see Spek 2003: 335–6; Linssen 2004: 108.
 Although there is a role for the king in many of the ritual texts of the Seleucid period (Linssen 2004: 18), these were copied or adapted from older compositions going back to the Neo-Babylonian period some centuries earlier, and it is not possible to know if the Seleucid or even Achaemenid monarchs ever participated in ceremonies, say, in the temples of Uruk. The same Antiochus I who left our only Seleucid royal building inscription, and who had been his father's viceroy for the east before his own accession, is reported by cuneiform chronicles to have worshipped at the ruins of Esagil (Spek 2004a) and in the temple of Sin in Babylon (Spek 2004b), and an astronomical diary records that Antiochus III (222–187) participated in the New Year ceremony there (Linssen 2004: 84), but there is no evidence that royal participation in the cult at Babylon was anything but infrequent. Most frequently, when the diaries record offerings made in Esagil, they are made by military commanders or high officials.
3. There must have a long period of transition when both the traditional Sumerian and Akkadian liturgy and Aramaic materials were employed. Colophons of Hellenistic cult texts explicitly state that they were copied for chanting (*ana zamāri*) in the temples (Linssen 2004: 14).

4. Anu-uballit was probably honoured with a Greek name by his Seleucid overlords (as was his earlier namesake, Anu-uballit Nicarchus; Sherwin-White 1987: 29), and would have used Greek in his dealings with the government in Seleucia. At the same time, he chose Aramaic, not Greek, letters for his temple inscription. Compare the situation at Palmyra from the late first century BC to the third century AD: 'Aramaic was considered the appropriate language for the linguistic domain of religion ... Greek ... is associated with public activities, whether the running of the city and its dependent territories, or the public honouring of notable citizens and foreign dignitaries' (Taylor 2002: 319–20).
5. The Aramaic tale of the seventh-century-BC civil war between the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and his brother Shamash-shum-ukin, preserved only on a single manuscript in Demotic transliteration (Steiner 1997), and the sayings of Ahiqar, a sage in the service of Ashurbanipal's father Esarhaddon, preserved in manuscript fragments at Elephantine (Lindenberger 1983), imply a large and almost entirely lost pagan literature in Aramaic (see now also Holm 2007: 220–4).
 Lost, too, are all late cuneiform texts written on wax-covered writing boards (Oelsner 2002: 15) and scrolls. In Houston *et al.* 2003: 455–6, I rather cavalierly dismissed the one Akkadian reference to a text written on a scroll, but Eckart Frahm has indicated to me that he has seen three more Akkadian colophons referring to copying texts from scrolls (see for now Frahm 2005: 45, and the thoughts of Oelsner 2007: 221; Westenholz 2007: 278–80; and cf. Clancier 2005: 90 n. 23). I hope to show elsewhere that these references must be to writing in cuneiform, and not to transliterations into Aramaic or Greek script. In any case, the kinds of compositions said to be copied from those scrolls, as the compositions found on the Graeco-Babyloniaca (Houston *et al.* 2003: 454–6; Brown, above; and the new treatment by Westenholz 2007), all belong to the 'stream of tradition', and should thus be no later than the mid-first century BC, i.e., they would not belong to the corpus of the latest cuneiform texts (but cf. Westenholz 2007, who dates the Graeco-Babyloniaca to 50 BC–50 AD, and Oelsner 2007: 221, who suggests 1st cent. BC–1st cent. AD).
6. The Tell Fisna tablet (Houston *et al.* 2003: 454 n. 5; Brown, above n. 15), however, may well, as Brown suggests (above n. 23), represent 'the scribbles of rememberers'.

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