

Intra-writer variation in Late Babylonian letters

My talk focuses on intra-writer variation in Late Babylonian temple letters from Mesopotamia. The letters stem from the main temple of the city of Uruk in Southern Mesopotamia. They date to around 530 BCE. Specifically, I will draw up a case study on two letters by a writer who belonged to the highest echelons of this temple to other high-ranking colleagues in a time of need, YOS 3, 17¹ and TCL 9, 129.² The letters concern the involvement of the temple in a royal building project. The sender of the letter, while being a full member of the temple administration, had a royal background. He sent his letters to two temple officials with local backgrounds.³ They stemmed from prominent Urukian families.⁴ The tension between royal and local influence is one way of reading these letters, but a focus on intra-writer variation provides us with deeper insights. One letter addresses an official of roughly equal status, similar to a “bishop”,⁵ the other addresses a lower-ranking temple scribe. These two letters are near-duplicates, but they differ at crucial points. Focusing on these discrepancies makes it possible to trace stylistic variation with regard to the intended addressees, the communicational situations where this was pertinent, and the rhetorical means chosen in these situations.

Abbreviations

YOS 3 Clay, A., 1919, *Neo-Babylonian Letters from Erech*. Yale Oriental Series. Babylonian Texts 3.

TCL 9 Contenau, G., 1926, *Contrats et lettres d'Assyrie et de Babylonie*. Textes cunéiformes du Louvre 9.

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¹ For editions, see Schmidl forthcoming, Tolini (2011: 274–277), Ebeling (1930–1934: 14–16).

² For editions of these texts, see Schmidl forthcoming, Tolini (2011: 221–223), Ebeling (1930–1934: 280–283).

³ Kleber (2008) treats the relationship between temple and crown during the period in question.

⁴ On prominent local families and members of the city administration or the royal administration, see, e.g., Jursa 2015.

⁵ While this term is admittedly anachronistic, it conveys the notion of the duties of the office of “*šatammu*”, as this office combined administrative and cultic responsibilities. For the usage of this term, see, e.g., Jursa (2007: 76⁺⁵).

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