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The Documentary Gaze as a Mesopotamian Innovation

Summary

This paper analyzes 'innovation' as a discursive, narrative and dramatized construction with a strong tendency towards reification. I review examples, arguing for an understanding of innovation that moves away from new physical or epistemic things, to advocate instead a discourse-critical, practice-centered and contextualized understanding of innovations. Two cases from ancient Mesopotamia illustrate my argument. The first is found in every treatise on world historical changes: the introduction of writing. The second is a previously underappreciated and unperceived innovation for which there is even no clear expression: the emergence of a 'documentary gaze'. I elucidate its original context with pictorial evidence and describe the political dimensions surrounding this innovation.

Keywords: Development of writing; mobility; history of documentation; gaze; scribal practice; Mesopotamia; narrative of innovation.

Mein Beitrag analysiert ‚Innovation‘ als diskursive, narrative und dramatisierte Konstruktion mit einer deutlichen Tendenz zur Verdinglichung. Fallstudien führen mich zum Vorschlag eines Diskurs-kritischen, Praxis-zentrierten und kontextualisierten Verständnisses von Innovationen. Zwei Fälle Altmesopotamiens dienen mir als Illustration. Der erste findet sich in jeder Abhandlung über welthistorisch bedeutsame Erfindungen: das Aufkommen von Schrift. Das zweite Beispiel ist eine unterschätzte und weitgehend unbemerkte Innovation, für die es bislang nicht einmal einen Begriff gibt: das Aufkommen eines ‚dokumentarischen Blicks‘. Ich beleuchte den Ursprungskontext mit Bildwerken und beschreibe die politischen Dimensionen dieser Neuerung.

Keywords: Schriftentwicklung; Mobilität; Dokumentationsgeschichte; Blick; Schreiberpraktiken; Mesopotamien; Innovationsnarrativ.

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I Introduction

I.1 Innovation as a discursive construct

'Epochal change,' 'fundamental breakthrough,' and 'groundbreaking innovation' are evaluative descriptions that occur in connection with the earliest forms of writing, the introduction of pottery, bronze, the earliest glass, the wheel, steam engines, the Pythagorean theorem, theories of relativity, computers, etc. I contend that such assessments of significant innovations and their consequences consist of little other than a historical dramatization. The actors in this play are not the political or military 'great men' of Rankean history, but usually *homines fabri*. Each innovation narrative starts out from a core event which is elaborated as much as possible in order to highlight the importance of the purportedly new discovery.

Innovation research is too often obsessed with showing the assumed or actual intended consequences of innovative events. For which uses was the wheel first invented, and into which techniques was it then integrated? What were the primary goals of early copper smelting? What was the purpose of the earliest forms of writing? Studies that originate from such questions often imply a functional essentialism which assumes that materials, object categories or an entire technology can be so deeply imbued with a basic function that it overshadows everything else. If one knows the origin of a thing or a technique, one knows the essence, which is why archeology looks for 'first occurrences' with such vigor. Friedrich Nietzsche criticized and rejected such ideas in his *Untimely Meditations*.¹ The search for 'firsts' has further effects on larger scale historical narratives as it tends to dramatize (hi)stories by minimizing foregoing events and processes.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* proceeds in a different way.² Instead of focusing on the intended consequences of innovations, he elaborates in great detail on the unintended effects. The structure of such innovation stories is distinct from the traditional descriptions of linear cause-effect chains, as it focuses on historical *divergence*.

1 Nietzsche 1887.

2 Schivelbusch 1987.

In the end, the dramatizing effect of such stories is even stronger than in more traditional narratives. According to Schivelbusch, railways and associated technologies and practices are at the beginning of a wide swath of incongruent phenomena such as the recognition of trauma as a serious disease, a developing understanding of fatigue of materials, the emergence of specific travel literatures and much more. We see an emerging network that is derived from one single cause.³

However, the dialectics of innovation consist of something else, namely, that each instance of innovation that we focus on turns into a discursive construct. From such a historical moment, many future paths diverge which we account for as further creations or a series of reactions. But every so-called innovation is also a short-term process where long-term preconditions *converge* into what is perceived and accounted for as novel. The relevance of an ‘innovation’ does not depend on its technical, even revolutionarily new character, but on a narrative whose underlying dialectics combines converging and diverging historical events in a specific way. The artifice of such event assemblages becomes particularly evident in their alleged long- as well as short-term cause-consequence configurations. Typically, academic treatises about innovations are shaped as discourses that (a) conceal convergent, antecedent processes of an innovation, (b) compress them sharply and/or (c) anchor large parts of the precedent processes as self-evident truths of an unquestioned and unquestionable lifeworld.⁴ In contrast to events preceding inventions/innovations, the consequences are presented as problematizable and explicitly present in the minds of those who experience innovations. However, consequences that are assumed to be intended, for example the cart as a consequence of the innovation of the ‘wheel’, should be set in the framework of unintended consequences. For example, Schivelbusch describes vividly how the travelers’ gaze changed after the advent of railway travels and how this affected the arts at the time.

Narratives about innovations present such series of consequences in detail. Depending on textual structures, the relation of intended and unintended consequences – situated in the arena of divergent phenomena – is designed to tie the two narrative elements of precedent processes and ensuing consequences together in a series of interconnected events. In Koselleck’s terminology⁵, narratives about innovations use silencing mechanisms to minimize spaces of experience and maximize the horizon of expectation within a teleological framework. Such discourses have a deeply dramatizing nature. At the same time, they propagate a future without a past. These narrative strategies have two main effects. First, we do not do justice to innovations, however defined, if we downplay long-term, preceding convergences. Second, the practical logic inherent in such convergences

3 One could read Hodder’s book *Entangled* (Hodder 2012) as a wide-ranging, pessimistic world history of divergence of human innovation.

4 I use this term in Habermas’ sense (Habermas 1987, Chapter VI).

5 Koselleck 1985, 255–276).

needs to be explored historically, rather than relegating the underlying processes to the realm of unquestionable traditions.

2 The invention of writing: a case study

A prime example of the use of such discursive constructs is the development of writing in ancient Mesopotamia. We can be fairly sure that writing first appeared in the context of a need to remember and plan economic processes. The interest in these processes is certainly part of the reason why the Late Uruk period (ca. 3500–3300 BCE)⁶, the time when this ‘event’ occurred, is one of the most intensively studied periods of Mesopotamian history.

The above-mentioned dramatization can be easily tracked, especially in synthesizing histories. D.O. Edzard belittles the documentary skills that were developed prior to the emergence of writing as “ein primitiver Zähl- oder gar Buchführungsmechanismus”;⁷ to then characterize writing as a performance that “die Menschheit seit ihrer Erfindung am Ende des 4. Jahrtausends nie wieder aufgegeben hat”⁸. “Die Schrift ist die größte Errungenschaft der Menschheit;”⁹ announces Astrid Nunn in order to explain that it was the “Erfindung eines Individuums oder einer kleinen Gruppe”¹⁰. Even more grandiose are the introductory remarks by Christopher Woods in a volume dedicated specifically to *The Invention of Writing*:

The ability to represent language graphically, to make language visible, stands as one of humanity’s greatest intellectual and cultural achievements [...] It would be difficult to dismiss the contention that writing – the boundary between history and prehistory – transformed civilization more than any other invention.¹¹

Smith calls such ideas about the emergence of writing sarcastically “intelligent design” models, since they claim a staunch will behind this innovation and an unfailing strategy for its implementation.¹² In his remarkable contribution, he argues that a complex process of visual sign-intensification is the start for the development of writing. He differentiates between “visual objects” and “visual words”; the former being the real world we see and categorize by naming it; the latter are the words we see when reading aloud,

6 Cf. Van Ess 2013.

7 Edzard 2009, 26 (“a primitive counting or even accounting mechanism”, translation R. B.).

8 Edzard 2009, 27 (“Humanity, since its invention at the end of the 4th millennium, never relinquished [writing] again”, translation R. B.).

9 Nunn 2012, 132 (“Writing is the greatest achievement of humankind”, translation R. B.).

10 Nunn 2012, 133 (“The invention of an individual or a small group”, translation R. B.).

11 Woods 2010, 15.

12 A. D. Smith 2013, 75.

and these make for a “more streamlined, less easily disrupted path to phonology than the visual object”¹³. Seeing and acting appropriately on words and on quotidian objects are different yet related practices.

In the work of Bottéro et al., we find another aspect of early writing that is echoed in the quote from Edzard:

The first and without doubt the most precious of the treasures invented by the ancient Mesopotamians – one that they passed on to us and that has profoundly revolutionized our lives, shaped and developed considerably our minds – is writing.¹⁴

According to such enunciations, the millennia-old innovation has a direct bearing on *our* lives. Because such convictions are constantly repeated in general discourse,¹⁵ they enter the sphere of unquestioned, self-evident truths.¹⁶

Not all discussions of the appearance of writing follow dominant discourse in such an uncritical fashion. Among treatises on the invention of writing, there is one variation that can be characterized by its attempt at what might best be called ‘linear differentiation’. A number of individual stages following the first manifestation of writing is defined in various ways. Writing in word signs changes to ‘rebus’ and syllabic writing; for others,¹⁷ the main stages are purely administrative writing and its change to the documentation of temporal series which appear later than the 4th millennium and are interpreted as the main transition from prehistory to history. In a different way, three stages of “pictographic writing – phonetic writing – language notation” are more or less finely divided.¹⁸ Often, alphabetic writing is added as a much later innovation. Truly long-term stories occasionally add book printing and digitalization.¹⁹

We may add a massive compendium of reflections to these narrations that discuss writing as a generative phenomenon. Above all, scholars discuss the changing relationship between orality and literacy. Shifts in the mode(s) of remembering that are caused by writing have been discussed in detail by Walter Ong, Jan Vansina, Jack Goody and Jan Assmann.²⁰ These and other scholars give the impression that writing as an innovation is ideally suited for a kind of narration that is typical of Schivelbusch’s works: writing is a novel practice that could colonize ever greater areas of the lifeworld. If management and word lists were the initial focus in the late 4th millennium in Mesopotamia, we see

13 A. D. Smith 2013, 77.

14 Bottéro, Herrenschmidt, and Vernant 2000, 19.

15 E.g. Habermas 2014.

16 When Ian Hodder claims a relevance of the domestication of cattle for present times, with similar reasons, this seems only strange because we are not

used to this specific long-term argument (Hodder 2012, 161).

17 E.g. Wilcke 1982.

18 Bottéro 1987, 98–112; Damerow 2012.

19 E.g. Elkins 1999, esp. 123–142.

20 Ong 2002; Vansina 1965; Goody 1986; Assmann 1992.

religious and political content being added in third millennium BCE texts;²¹ letters and contracts follow, until scribes even record music in cuneiform script in the 14th century BCE.²² However, it should be noted that scholars focus only on a specific range of these diverging tendencies that result from the first appearance of writing: they search for the spread of this innovation solely in the realm of cognitive practices, activities that are restricted to the themes of conceptualizing, thinking and reading.

A more recent trend consists of research into the complex materiality of writing and related practices. Heidelberg University devotes a whole Collaborative Research Center to “Material Text Cultures.”²³ The Center focuses mainly on the practice of writing and the associated materials and less on the semantics and conceptual elements. Jonathan Taylor investigates in great detail issues of reuse and recycling of clay tablets, as well as the complex processes that precede their production.²⁴ The shift from writing on the plastic material of moist clay to hard media such as wood, stone or metal is discussed by Susan Pollock.²⁵ She suggests that two aspects of divergence emerge that have hitherto been neglected. Once ancient scribes wrote on clay, their shift to new and other media should not be taken for granted. In writing, complex and exact signs were initially only impressed on soft and plastic clay; carving into stone and other hard materials was a very different affair. These inscribed objects, at the beginning restricted to cylinder seals, are in several ways comparable to the tablets: they are functionally anchored in the sphere of administration and management. Therefore, users of the object categories tablet and seal were often identical, or at least they stood in a hierarchical relationship to each other in one and the same apparatus. In addition, many of the relations between both kinds of objects and the human body are similar. Seals and tablets are objects that can be easily held in one hand,²⁶ and both afford the concentration of a human gaze. They are things that appeal to the visual sense. Writing later spreads from tablets and seals like an infection to other objects such as vessels, weapons or stone stelae. For stelae and other objects much larger than tablets and seals, it was necessary to experiment in order to monumentalize cuneiform writing.

A second and much wider field concerns another consequence of writing: the acquisition of its practice. From cultural anthropology we know of two basic forms of learning, imitative and generative. Imitative learning dominates in many non-industrial societies²⁷ and is based on the fact that practical, embodied skills such as chopping wood, weeding or sawing can only be acquired through exercises that imitate the performances

21 The thesis of a divinatory origin of Mesopotamian writing is still considered a possibility by a few scholars such as Jean-Jacques Glassner (Glassner 2003, 199).

22 Duchesne-Guillemin 1980, 10, 15–16.

23 Website under: www.materiale-textkulturen.de/ (visited on 17/01/2017).

24 Taylor 2011, see also Taylor and Cartwright 2011.

25 Pollock 2016.

26 See also Marzahn 2013.

27 See Bureau and Saivre 1988.

of more skilled people, but not by learning abstract ‘discursified’ rules. However, imitative learning is unsuitable for the transmission of practices such as specialized and often secret performative knowledge in rituals, or for the transmission of writing skills.²⁸ No one can learn writing without an explicit explanation of the specific relations between signs and their meaning, between arbitrary symbols and phonemes, especially since most scribes must be able to generate new, never before encountered sentences. Therefore the cultural transmission of writing is only possible by means of discursively formulated, generative, and likely rule-based learning.

3 Before writing: de-dramatizing narratives

In a discourse-critical approach such as the one followed here, the specialized scholarly literature on the emergence of writing in ancient Mesopotamia displays the characteristics of a dispute between a dramatizing and a de-dramatizing camp. The proponents of dramatization insist on fundamental change, while others argue for the opposite by de-emphasizing the importance of the ‘invention’ of writing in the late 4th millennium.²⁹ According to this latter group of scholars, thousands of years of development of small accounting devices can be organized into a series of incremental, chronologically not yet entirely clear steps that led to the emergence of writing. The tokens, small clay objects of geometric form, are the earliest such devices, already known from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic in many places in Western Asia.³⁰ From the late 7th millennium BCE onward, people also began to use stamp seals, albeit as objects that could have also functioned as amulets and buttons. At the same time we see the first evidence for massive use of both tokens and seals for administrative operations at the northern Syrian site of Sabi Abyad.³¹ People sealed various types of mobile containers and doors, and likely also containers that enclosed tokens. While stamp seals in the 6th mill. BCE still retain an ambivalent status between amulet and administrative object, they develop into more complex forms in the 5th mill. BCE Ubaid period and are eventually replaced by cylinder seals in the 4th mill. In the same general change from stamp to cylinder seals – so far imprecisely dated only to the early part of the Uruk period – Mesopotamians started to package variably shaped tokens in small spherical, hollow clay bullae. These items served as contract documents and bore seal imagery on their outside. Probably somewhat later, the tokens that were enclosed in these hollow clay balls were impressed on the outside, turning them into a conceptual precursor of the earliest clay tablets.³² It

28 Glassner 2003, 179.

29 E.g. Nissen 1986, Nissen 2012; Schmandt-Besserat 1992; contributions to Ferioli et al. 1991.

30 Schmandt-Besserat 1974.

31 Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997.

32 Nissen 1986.

should be noted as well that the first tablets seem to have been purely numerical, while a qualifier of what was enumerated in the form of a sign was only added at a later stage. Present knowledge thus seems to suggest that numeracy preceded literacy.

The subject of a long-term genealogy of writing has been discussed in detail in a recent publication by Reichel.³³ He comes to the conclusion that Mesopotamian societies had “pre-scribal bureaucrats” in the 4th mill. BCE.³⁴ According to Reichel, the emergence of writing was not a planned invention, but rather a product of pre-existing circumstances: “Mesopotamia’s writing system represented, therefore, a *technological* not a *conceptual*, innovation.”³⁵ The discourse about the invention of writing is perhaps exceptional, as a relatively large group of scholars explicitly addresses medium- and long-term processes of convergence, and thus criticizes imaginations of creativity and originality for the process of the advent of writing.

We cannot end the comparison between two types of narrations here. The story which Nissen³⁶, Englund³⁷ and others favor, simply mirrors the traditional narrative of great inventions and their consequential spread. De-dramatizing narratives insert the traditional *creatio ex nihilo*-discourse into a multi-millennia development of precursors of script in the realm of management practices: “So gesehen markiert die Schrift den Endpunkt einer langen Reihe von Möglichkeiten zur Kontrolle wirtschaftlicher Vorgänge.”³⁸ The earliest cuneiform writing, anchored in the field of administration, is similar to its predecessors in its function of recording quantifiable and quantified processes that enable planning for the future. It is, as the title *Archives before Writing*³⁹ concisely summarizes, a systematic attempt to outsource memory into the sphere of materiality. According to this type of narration, the emergence of writing changes the means by which this process is performed, but otherwise no fundamental innovation is involved. Furthermore, the material form of writing – clay mixed with water, brought into a plastic consistency to be turned into a rectangular shape, and then incised or impressed – is very similar to some of the large complex tokens themselves, which bear incisions.⁴⁰ In this connection, one may wonder whether the idea of incising flat token surfaces with straight lines for additional information could be an imitation of the method of manufacturing stamp seals with abstract designs, a kind of artifact still found in the Uruk period.⁴¹ Change in the realm of bureaucratic technologies should not simply be regarded as a process of obsolescence of previously used means of mnemonic storage.

33 Reichel 2013.

34 Reichel 2013, 47.

35 Reichel 2013, 65; emphasis in the original.

36 Nissen 2012.

37 Englund 1998, 42–49.

38 Nissen 2013, 169 (“Seen this way, writing marks the endpoint of a long sequence of possibilities for the control of economic processes”; translation R. B.).

39 Ferioli et al. 1991.

40 Marzahn 2013, 179.

41 See Butterlin 2013, 208, Abb. 34.3.

These older systems did not disappear, at least not immediately, but continued to be used parallel to writing.⁴²

Academics usually consider such discursive constructs – dramatizing and de-dramatizing – as differing scientific opinions. Since these narratives are embedded in other nuanced arguments, the purely discursive labor of their construction with its far-reaching effects remains largely hidden: it is inextricably interwoven with factual arguments and contextual descriptions. The obfuscation of discursive work, as argued so forcefully by Foucault⁴³, is not based on ‘better’ arguments, but mostly on positions of power within discursive fields.

4 Convergence instead of precedence

Writing is not only bound to its purely administrative predecessors, such as seals, tokens, sealed clay balls and numeracy. A ball-shaped or other clay wrapping, and also the advent of clay tablets, would not have been possible without another precursor: the “container revolution” of the Neolithic, originally defined by Lewis Mumford and more recently elaborated by Chris Tilley⁴⁴. Containers come in many different forms and functions, e.g., houses, storage rooms or pits, as vessels, graves and other entities.⁴⁵ Containers are a tangible metaphor for an empty space which is separated from a potentially chaotic exterior by a skin or shell. Davis describes this innovation as largely unnoticed by archaeologists and considers it to be a phenomenon of emergence: it enables the development of other “technologies of containment” without being spectacular itself.⁴⁶ Containment technologies are relevant to this topic insofar as their existence was a prerequisite for the planned storage of small items such as the tokens used for counting.

Archaeologically, we encounter the multiplication of ‘containers’ since neolithization, especially in the form of pottery production, but also in the first containers for people, houses, and, as already commented, in ‘containers for the counted.’ To take the example of herd animals, containers with tokens standing for the number of animals are nothing other than the symbolic expression for a stable. Unfortunately, the earliest containers for counters are rarely identified because most of them were likely made from perishable materials. However, even more essential than the container itself is the possibility of opening and closure that appeared with them. The phenomenon of the lid or door has been well documented, for example, in the lid-like “portholes” for rooms

42 See Nissen 2013, 172 for continued use of pre-writing bureaucratic means; Houston, Baines, and Cooper 2003 on obsolescence.

43 Foucault 1984.

44 Tilley 1999.

45 Gamble 2007, 87–110.

46 Davis 1993, 130; see also Knappett, Malafouris, and Tomkins 2010.

at Ganj Darreh.⁴⁷ A systematized derivation of the lid uses a logic of *différance*⁴⁸, a technology that consists of (a) a deferred transmission of information that is by necessity negotiated because of a contractual time lag between closing an opening of the container that (b) supposes a difference between inside and outside. The systematization of such *différance* and the appearance of lids and doors can be dated to the late Neolithic, according to present knowledge to the period called “Transitional Halaf”; when clay and seals were used to prevent the unauthorized opening of doors and vessel lids.

Finally, I have already discussed generative learning without which the intergenerational transmission of writing is impossible. Some finds indicate that this type of learning already existed in 5th millennium BCE Mesopotamia, long before writing appeared on the scene. The first precursor of a pre-writing spread of generative learning may actually be found in the craft of house building. Small model bricks from Tepe Gawra seem to have served as a means to exercise the laying of bricks in a ‘theoretical’ way, perhaps underlined by general rules.⁴⁹ I assume that the complex and very regular laying of so-called *Riemchen* mud bricks for monumental buildings in the following Uruk period resulted from the establishment of rule-based learning in the field of architecture. The supporting evidence is weak, but it cannot be excluded that this type of learning was one of the unrecognized *preconditions* for the development of writing, rather than one of its consequences, as is often maintained.

5 Unrecognized innovations: the example of the documentary gaze

The ‘container revolution’ has long gone unperceived as an innovation because it is not a strictly localized technology with an objectified form. Similarly, other technological innovations remain hidden to scholarly research. One reason is that many innovations are primarily situated in the realm of a particular practice rather than in a category of objects with clear shape and/or material characteristics. However, stories of innovations become interesting when one starts with practices rather than things. Some such narratives turn into creative discourses, for instance Garfinkel’s *Dance at the Dawn of Agriculture*.⁵⁰ But what about other practices, e.g. the advent of swimming, or of shackling as a technique immobilization? Such techniques of the body should be closely explored for their historical development, an admittedly difficult endeavor since it can only be pursued through imagery or research on human physical remains.

47 P. E. Smith 1990, 330–331.

48 I intentionally abuse Derrida’s term, who coined it as a merging of “deferring” and “differing” with the

express intent to analyze and criticize the functioning of language (Derrida 1982, 3–27).

49 Eichmann 1991, 96–97; Bernbeck 2003, 226.

50 Garfinkel 2003.

Here I am concerned with a complex writing technique which consists of linking several physical practices: the simultaneous use of visual and motor skills, also known as hand-eye coordination. If writing is usually defined as the ‘objectification of language,’ and thus the materialization of auditory perception, there is a variant which I call the “documentary gaze”: writing using a gaze that captures and categorizes a specific sector of the world meant to be recorded. In the terminology of Adam D. Smith, cited above, this complex activity includes the *observation of visual objects*, and the *production of visual words*.⁵¹

Archaeologists should be particularly sensitive towards the development of this documentary gaze as they employ it constantly during field work. The physical work of excavating in trenches is continued in a documentary practice that translates the visible entities into words, graphs and photos. Even nowadays, the skills necessary for this activity can only be acquired through imitative, not through generative learning.⁵² Internships and ‘field schools’ are an admission that not everything can be learned via generative rules. Documenting as a practice cannot be carried out simultaneously with other activities. Depending on the excavation system, it may be deemed preferable to separate documentation from excavation by assigning specialized personnel for each of these tasks, or both are performed sequentially by the same people.

Documenting, in the sense of simultaneous visual evaluation and written notation, is a practice that cannot easily be reconstructed archaeologically or historically. It is a generalized practice that can occur in many social spheres. As previously mentioned, writing as a practice can be studied through detailed observations of clay tablets. However, the documentary gaze includes visually stringent assessments in addition to writing. Gazing as a discriminatory practice is hardly ever directly problematized in ancient written documents, and can only be derived from imagery with great difficulty.

One way to reconstruct the development of the documentary gaze is to assume that it emerged at the same time as writing itself. One strong argument in favor of such a thesis is that the first Mesopotamian writing was decidedly not the materialization of spoken language, but the symbolic reproduction of counted objects and living things. People did not start writing down what they heard. However, the information inscribed on tablets and particularly on the so-called “tags”⁵³ was not necessarily inspected at the same time as the writing of the tablets. The amount of information on these labels was so small that it could be kept in mind for some time. A simultaneity of the discriminatory gaze and writing was not (yet) a given. Rather, early writing functioned according

51 A. D. Smith 2013, 76–78.

52 The tendency to mechanize this task, to mobilize electronic means in order to outsource the documentary gaze into various machines connected to

a camera eye, leads to more and more schematized results that suppress a fundamental element in our lifeworld: ambivalence.

53 See Nissen 2013, Abb. 26.7.

to the logic of *différance*, deferred visual information transformed into a different, new medium.

Another potential form of documentation involved the dictation of information or text to a scribe, especially when the content was administrative in nature. A reason for this form of documentation becomes apparent when we imagine a concrete situation of writing. The finely levigated clay-water mix used for tablets must be brought into the right shape and consistency for writing and it does not maintain this plastic state for long, especially in a very dry climate such as Mesopotamia's. The specific Mesopotamian writing material is distinguished from other media such as parchment and ink in two ways: first, its preparation requires several steps which can be summarized in a *chaîne opératoire*, and secondly, the last steps of this process turn the material into a plastic, pre-formed state that can only be produced immediately prior to writing. The short time span during which clay holds its plasticity turns cuneiform writing into an expedient practice. A scenario that focuses on the practice of writing leads inevitably to the question of how one would have to imagine a situation of detailed documentation. Initially, Mesopotamian writing was very likely an attempt to outsource mnemonic labor. Because the information to be recorded was mnemonic rather than visual, no co-presence of recorder and recorded was required. In addition, independence from the visual presence of that which was written down turned into a precondition for the introduction of glottographic writing in the 3rd mill. BCE and the ensuing expansion to other narrative categories. Hints for the co-presence of recorder and recorded, or 'scribal eyewitnessing' are difficult to extract from written texts themselves. Documenting 'on-site' can be achieved if the documented items themselves are mobile so that they can be inspected in a scribal office. This may be possible for very small objects, humans and animals. Indeed, state authorities use this mechanism quite often as a technique for the submission of human subjects. Otherwise, however, a precondition for the documentary gaze is a *mobile* technique of writing.

6 Images of scribal practice

My initial attempts at narrowing down the time-space parameters of the innovation of the scribal gaze gave me the impression that imagery is slightly more enlightening than textual documents, even though the elite activity of writing is only very rarely represented in ancient Mesopotamia. Neo-Assyrian sculptors and painters from the 8th and 7th centuries BCE produced a number of such images, almost always depicting two scribes who accompany the notorious war campaigns of the Assyrians. Recently, Julian

Reade published descriptions of these scenes along with an extensive catalogue.⁵⁴ For my purposes, Reade's article and older existing literature on the subject are doubly of interest. First, they are part of a scholarly narrative that revolves around this kind of writing in the form of a 'non-innovation' and counterexample to the 'emergence of writing' drama applied to the late 4th mill. BCE. I will try to insert this novel way of documenting in the context of a narrative of innovation. I should state at the outset that this is a purely formal exercise, consistent with my conviction that 'innovation' is largely a matter of narrative framing rather than historical reality. Secondly, Assyrian imagery is keen on showing the practice of writing, rather than its products: tablets and scrolls. The context of scribal practices reveals a complex multitasking that is the basis for these scenes.

In Reade's contribution, a total of 35 images of scribes is discussed.⁵⁵ The aim is an exact dating and the identification of material media of writing, which could be a clay tablet, a wooden, wax-filled diptych or a parchment-like material. Usually, two scribes are shown side by side, one with, the other without a beard. Diptych and tablet almost never occur as writing materials in the same image; rather, it is almost always parchment on the one hand, and a tablet or a diptych on the other (Fig. 1).

Contemporary texts mention scribes who write in the Aramaic and Assyrian languages. Since Aramaic is a cursive script, mostly written with ink on parchment, it is more or less obvious to assume a bilingual documentation of Neo-Assyrian war events.⁵⁶ Reade's article takes a "catalogistic" approach.⁵⁷ He lists all depictions of scribes in the Neo-Assyrian period. He then discusses the general context, i.e. the complete scene in which such scribes appear, as well as their equipment, clothing, and gender. Reade detects chronological change, but his focus is on the art-historical dimension, such as contexts of representations, antiquaria, the scribes' clothing, hair-style, gestures and techniques of writing. An essential part also evokes the question of what the scribes recorded, since Reade maintains that the one with parchment could have produced small-scale sketches for reliefs rather than Aramaic texts. Older scholarly papers that discuss these representations often view them as mere illustrative material for the practice of writing. At best, they mobilize these depictions in discussions of Aramaic writing, writing on diptychs or for a book cover of assyriological *Festschriften*. Overall, these narratives assume that the appearance of paired scribes on Neo-Assyrian reliefs and wall paintings amounts to nothing significantly new. Rather, writing, language, and documentation line up neatly in a context of long-term traditions. The pairing of scribes is interpreted

54 Reade 2012. Reade's article omits non-Assyrian depictions of scribes from the imperial periphery from Zincirli (Bar Rakib stela, dated to ca. 730 BCE) and Marash (a funerary stela of Tarhunpiyas, dated to ca. 875–800 BCE; see Bonatz 2000, Cat. No. C9, Tafel

IX). They differ significantly from Assyrian ones by omitting the practice of writing.

55 Reade 2012.

56 Fales 2007.

57 For this notion, see Bernbeck 2010.



Fig. 1 Two scribes, with a soldier behind them, registering decapitated heads of enemies, looted objects and deportees (South Palace, Nineveh, Room XIX).

as a result of the tendency towards bureaucratic bilingualism.⁵⁸ This, too, appears in the above-mentioned scholarly narratives only as a remarkable process in the long term, a slow change that is outside of the more abrupt temporal mode of innovations.

7 Learning to see the documentary gaze

Nowhere does this discourse include the question of why a visualization of the scribes was deemed desirable or perhaps even necessary. However, the small number of representations from the second half of the 8th century BCE includes a remarkable development. The following interpretation rests on two assumptions. The first is that currently known illustrations of Neo-Assyrian scribes are representative of a larger whole. Second, depictions on the reliefs and a wall painting are to some extent reflections of past real practices. With these two provisos, scribal representations of the 8th century BCE differ significantly from those of the 7th century, with one exception to be discussed below.

⁵⁸ E.g. Tadmor 1991.



Fig. 2 Vanquished city, lower level: deportee families; above: Assyrians driving herds away; inset: two scribes and a dictating eunuch (Tiglath Pileser III, 745–726 BCE; Central Palace, Nimrud).

Among the scribal depictions, Reade lists six as dating to the 8th century, from the time of Tiglath Pileser III (745–726 BCE) to Sargon II (721–705 BCE).⁵⁹ One of these does not depict a scribe, but a soldier who appears to be reading out an announcement.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Reade's Catalogue No. 1, a depiction on one of the Balawat Gates from the time of Shalmaneser III, contains an image of a craftsman who chisels an image into the rocks at the Tigris sources. The figure

is not a scribe (for this, see Schachner 2009, 213–217).

⁶⁰ Reade 2012, Cat. No. 7.

The oldest example of scribes, from the time of Tiglath Pileser III, shows women and children in the bottom row on bullock carts leaving a conquered city in the direction of an unknown world. The crenellated city is crowned by a date palm. Above this scene, Assyrians lead away large quantities of booty in the form of sheep and goats (Fig. 2). A contrasting scene is inserted into this standard war depiction: three figures, set apart from their environment. A eunuch standing on the left is holding in his right hand a stick like a musical conductor. He is armed with a sword. Turning his face to the right, he has the conquered city behind him, and has firmly in his view two beardless scribes, both without a sword or dagger. The scribe in front is obviously writing on a clay tablet, the rear one on parchment. This scene can be read as one in which the amount of spoils after taking a city is dictated to war scribes. Interestingly, the scribes are standing with the booty behind them: they document what is communicated to them orally, not what they observe.

A well known wall painting dates somewhat later. On stylistic grounds, it is often set in the time of Shalmaneser V (726–721 BCE). The two scribes in this scene are waiting in a row behind Assyrian soldiers who stand in front of the king or governor. Here, writing as a practice may play only a metaphorical role. Behind them are prisoners. Two reliefs from Khorsabad from the time of Sargon II show an interesting development of the scribal scene.⁶¹ The first is the well-known looting of the Urartian temple at Muşasir, an event that can be dated to the year 714 BCE. Similar to the scene from Tiglath Pileser's time, two scribes stand in front of a person who dictates information to them. However, the latter sits on a folding chair, his back turned to the temple as the Assyrian soldiers drag away captured shields over the roof of the temple. This time, it is the scribes who face the action of looting.

Reade's catalogue number 6 shows two scribes with a well-armed soldier and a military camp behind them.⁶² A pile of at least six severed heads lies before them, and beyond the two scribes, prisoners in lace-ups are led by, followed by another Assyrian soldier and two enemies wearing identical footwear with chained ankles. An inscription in the military camp likely identifies it as "camp of Taklak-ana-Bel" (an Assyrian year eponym and a limu-official of the year 715 BCE). In all likelihood, this war scene can be identified with ancient Kišeşlu and its transformation into the assyrianized settlement of Kar Nabu.⁶³ This is the oldest known scene in which the scribes clearly document the spoils of war without any intermediary; they write what they see (killed enemies and prisoners of war⁶⁴). The custom of representing two scribes employing different writing techniques has, at this point, a tradition that harks back at least 30 years. It is important

61 Reade 2012, Cat. No. 4 and 6.

62 Reade 2012; see also Albenda 1986, Pl. 137.

63 Albenda 1986, 92.

64 Albenda 1986, Pl. 137.

to keep in mind that the two scenes from Mušasir and Kišešlu depict events from consecutive years of warfare, 715 and 714 BCE. The creation of the reliefs must therefore fall between 714 and 706 BCE, the date of the inauguration of the entire Khorsabad palace complex.⁶⁵

The 28 later Assyrian reliefs with scribes repeat the pairwise depiction of scribes. However, in none of these cases from the time of kings Sennacherib and Assurbani-pal,⁶⁶ covering most of the 7th century BCE, is a dictating figure included. This change to direct documentation of what the scribes see can be explained in two ways. First, it may simply be a shift in pictorial conventions, where the act of speaking (dictation) is suppressed. The second possibility is in my view the more likely one. It is related to the question of why two scribes are depicted writing on two different media – clay or wax/wooden tablet on the one hand, parchment on the other. Again, the scholarly answer is the increasing Aramaization of the empire, where Aramaic was written on parchment and Assyrian on tablets.⁶⁷ That may well be, but the double-language documentation probably had the goal of preventing corruption in the scribal ranks. This thesis is supported by Fales' and Bunnens' contention that Aramaic writing did not originate in the regions where we might suspect the densest Aramaic population (today's Syria), but rather in the Assyrian imperial core since the style of the language is in several instances a kind of "pidgin Aramaic."⁶⁸ In addition, in two of the older scenes from the 8th century, an overseer dictates the lists of booty. Scribes wrote what they heard, but not what they saw. In both cases, the imagery seems to insist on accuracy when it comes to the economic basis of war – booty, including deportees and their potential labor. Exact, or at least pseudo-exact, documentation is not only confirmed in reliefs, but also in the case of Sargon's 8th campaign, in an extremely detailed and, on appearance, accurate report of this campaign.⁶⁹

From Sargon II's time onwards, more precisely after 715 BCE, war scribes became independent and wrote down the figures of looting and deportation without the control of a superior. They were allowed to or had to record what they observed themselves. From these changes, one can infer increased confidence in scribal personnel on the part of the court as well as loyalty of these first 'war correspondents.' Furthermore, they had to have acquired specific multitasking skills of writing and simultaneously discriminating visually. Writing as a materialization of the auditory and reading as a retranslation of the

65 Tadmor 1958, 97.

66 According to Reade (2012), the dates of some fall into the years of the second-to-last Assyrian king, Sin-šar-iškun.

67 As mentioned, Reade maintains that the scribe with parchment could also have drawn sketches for the reliefs (Reade 2012, 708–712). However, the appear-

ance of scribes only in connection with the spoils of war, rather than actual fighting, renders this interpretation unlikely.

68 Fales 1999; Bunnens 2009, 81.

69 Zimansky 1990. For a recent translation of Sargon's *Gottesbrief* see Mayer 2013.

visible into the audible were abridged here to a materialization of the visible without the intermediate stage of the audible.

This innovation falls under the radar of scientific visibility for three reasons. First, today's documentation processes are similar to those of the Assyrian scribes. A division of labor between dictation and writing still exists but has been almost eliminated from practical life. Second, I am suspicious of the implicit assumption behind much scholarship on scribal practices that the normal process of documenting, as attested since the earliest days, consisted of writing down what one saw, without any oral intermediary. For this kind of documentation practice there is, to my knowledge, just as little evidence as for the interposition of an oral intermediary. Third, and probably most importantly, the innovation described here is a reconfiguration of a complex web of relations of practices, including writing, the classifying and discriminating gaze, administrative mobility and collective violence.

This new documentation technology remains in use in later times. Thus, Alexander of Macedonia employed Anaximenes of Lampsacus and Callisthenes of Olynthus as official war correspondents;⁷⁰ the Roman general Pompey's war writer was Theophanes of Mytilene.⁷¹ In the early modern period, war reporting became an even more widespread phenomenon with the introduction of printing technology and the advent of newspapers. The latest turn in the idea of battlefield records became the infamous 'embedded journalism' of the 21st century in the Iraq War,⁷² whose earliest precursor can be said to be the Assyrian scribes. However, this technique of documentation had a number of other effects that may have been more important in the long term than war reporting alone. I limit myself to (a) the 'stately gaze' which the Assyrian soldiers and scribes had to incorporate, and (b) a multi-layered mistrust, which is likely to have evolved from the recording itself.

The scribal scenes always depict moments *after* battles when enemies were beaten, tortured, and killed or when captured towns and castles were burned and razed. In these moments of apparently random destruction, an underlying discipline was built in, since booty had to be channeled towards the Assyrian king so that he received what he deserved according to imperial ideology. Military economics involves discipline after victory. Unfortunately, this never implies the gentle treatment of victims, but the discriminatory skill⁷³ to recognize and sort out two kinds of booty. People, especially women and children, as well as animals and certain types of objects (weapons, valuable furniture), had to be brought before the scribal registrars (Fig. 3). We can assume that there was also individually appropriated booty that was of little interest to officials. Assyrian soldiers must have internalized a 'stately gaze' in order to carry out correctly the sorting

70 Demandt 2009, 2–3.

71 Gold 1985.

72 Cooke 2007.

73 On this notion see Baxandall 1972, 33–34.

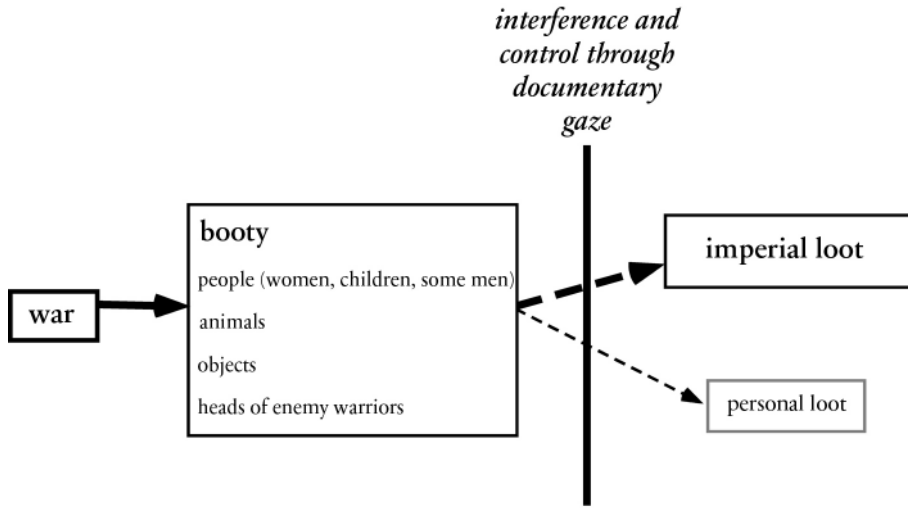


Fig. 3 Discriminatory skills that were mobilized in Assyrian post-battle situations.

of royal booty. Scribes, initially under the supervision of dictating eunuchs, were the organs of control of this discriminatory process.

A second element that emerges with this documentary gaze is a systemic mistrust (Fig. 4). There were certainly post-battle records of booty before their depiction in the middle of the 8th century BCE. The systematization of such record-keeping likely originated in the desire to control looting, and thus the economic profit of permanent wars, more effectively. The first attempts to set up such a system with a two-tiered documentation team, the superior responsible for the stately gaze and classification, the inferior for the materialization of the records on clay and parchment, dates to the time of Tiglath Pileser III. However, it soon proved too cumbersome and complex to maintain.

Bilingualism was apparently enough of a control agent to ensure scribal reliability. This is shown by the Kišešlu relief from Sargon's time and the 7th century renderings of scribal war documentation. An additional element may be the context of documentation. In the scenes with unsupervised scribes, we see in almost all cases soldiers that seem to be controlling not just the deportees, looted objects and head counts, but also the scribes themselves. The depiction of intra-Assyrian control mechanisms on the palace reliefs remains understudied because of the focus on war and relations between enemies. Finally, the oft-repeated depiction of the scribal scene is an indication of the institutionalization of disciplinary practices. The palace reliefs of the 7th century show 'booty control' as an integral part of war.

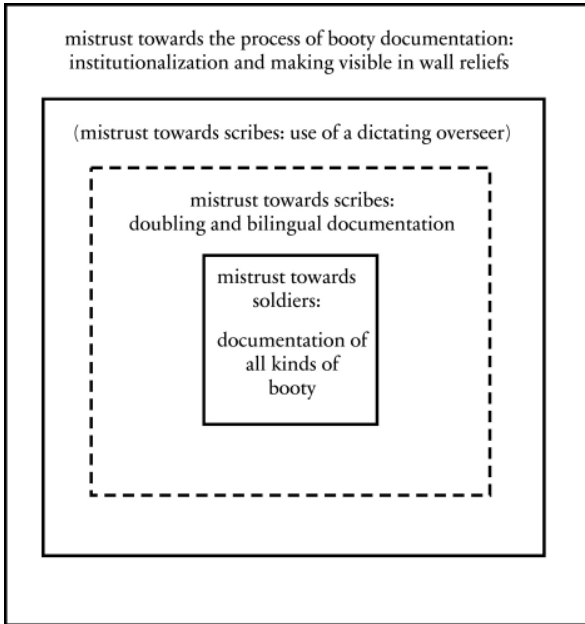


Fig. 4 Multi-layered mistrust in the Assyrian looting economy.

8 De-dramatization

Such cases of innovation are easy to de-dramatize since the phenomenon of historical convergence does not consist of pointing out precursors to a material item such as weaving equipment, sailboats, copper objects or other materially definable entities. Since the documentary gaze is a combination of practices, it suffices to show how they were gradually joined together. The four individual elements of this practice (writing, the discriminatory gaze, administrative mobility, and collective acts of violence) have been known for millennia, and some of them are known to have been linked long before Neo-Assyrian times. For instance, the diptychs of the Uluburun ship-wreck from the Late Bronze Age⁷⁴ can surely be interpreted as one of the earliest indications for the skill of writing on wax tablets, mobile documentation in general and likely a commercially oriented discriminatory gaze. The need for documentary precision to visually assess quantities, qualities, scales, colors or even the weight of things immediately and accurately developed in the traders' own interest. I also argued above that a link between writing and mobility should not be assumed as a simple matter of course.⁷⁵ Writing on

74 Payton 1991; Symington 1991.

75 The shipping of finished texts, for example letters or the collection of materials for libraries is

known from early times on (Frahm 2012; Cancik-Kirschbaum 2013).

clay was ill-suited for this kind of multitasking. The combination of these practices depended on the development of wooden, wax-filled diptychs that could be folded and closed. The oldest evidence for the existence of this writing technique stems from the late 3rd mill. BCE.⁷⁶ But its widespread appropriation arose only with the Hittite empire, where we find two different terms for a “scribe [who writes on] clay” and a “scribe [who writes on] wood.”⁷⁷ Whether such innovations are of minor or major importance is a matter of our own framing. It is my impression that in the case of the documentary gaze, current dominant discourse systematically de-emphasizes its innovative nature by inserting it into a long-term historical stream of small practical steps without fundamental consequences.

9 Instead of a conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that innovation is a discursively constructed phenomenon that depends to a large extent on the variable inclusion of relations between preceding conditions and consequences in narratives about innovations. Before we draw far-reaching conclusions from the factuality of an innovation, it is necessary to investigate closely scientific narrations that form the background for such changes. Innovation narratives are often delicately constructed discourses whose goal is the emphasis or outright suppression of the new. As such, they serve the fragmentation of a uniform chronology into individual, easily grasped sections such as ‘aceramic – ceramic’, ‘pre-industrial – industrial – post-industrial’, etc. A close analysis of individual historical cases in large part dissolves innovations into a dialectical relationship of assumed past expectations on the one hand and a more or less dominant role of traditions and experiences on the other. The second argument of my paper is concerned with novelty itself. Innovation discourses tend to glorify tangible objects and neglect practices that may be at the origin of their very existence. If my paper has an element of a ‘symmetrical archaeology’, it consists of a call to balance these discourses and their fetishizing of materiality by paying more attention to the side of human practice. In this sense, I follow Schivelbusch’s approach, whose history is one of traveling in trains, but not of the railroad as a material object.

76 E.g. Wiseman 1955.

77 Hoffner 2009, 8–10.

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- 1 Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998, Plate 208–209. 2 Barnett and Falkner 1962, Plate VI.
3 Reinhard Bernbeck. 4 Reinhard Bernbeck.

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