Lexical texts, ancient Near East

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Cuneiform lexical lists may be divided into word lists and sign lists. Word lists were often thematically organized, listing all words for trees, birds, pots, and so on and may be either unilingual (Sumerian only) or bilingual (Sumerian–Akkadian). Sign lists provided an inventory of CUNEIFORM signs and usually pair each sign with glosses that explain its proper use. Since most cuneiform signs may be used for more than one word or syllable, each sign is repeated several times with different glosses.

Word lists are as old as writing itself, introduced at the end of the fourth millennium BCE. This archaic cuneiform writing system was an administrative device, created to keep track of increasingly complex transactions. The purpose of the archaic lexical lists was to standardize and teach the symbols that were needed for this administrative system. Accordingly, the lists contain words for officials, containers, and commodities, as well as numeric symbols. Until the end of the third millennium BCE, word lists do not contain any explanation, but simply enumerate one word after another. In later periods word lists were often laid out in two columns with Sumerian entries on the left and Akkadian translations on the right. Such translations were not provided with further explanations or examples, but simply paired a Sumerian word with an Akkadian one.

Sign lists were introduced in the Old Babylonian period (around 1800 BCE) when they were used in elementary education. Sign lists tend to include common signs as well as extremely rare or abstruse ones, preserving signs and sign values that were no longer in active use.

In the first millennium BCE lexical lists became prestigious repositories of traditional knowledge. They were used both in scribal education and in scholarly commentaries to the ancient literary tradition.

In modern research, lexical lists are essential for the decipherment of Sumerian. In addition, they provide rich data for Mesopotamian intellectual history and for researching the cultural self-understanding of Babylonian and Assyrian scribes and scholars.

SEE ALSO: Akkadian language; Scribes, ancient Near East; Sumerian language.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Civil, M. (1995) "Ancient Mesopotamian lexicography." In J. M. Sasson, ed., *Civilizations of the ancient Near East*: 2305–14. New York.

Veldhuis, N. *et al.* (2003) [online] "Digital corpus of cuneiform lexical texts." Available from http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt. (Accessed May 14, 2011.)

T he ancient Near East, until about a century ago, had as its chief witness the text of the Hebrew Bible. Relatively insignificant was the evidence recovered from sources outside the Bible; that which had been found had not been sufficiently understood to serve as a reliable historical source. Through explorations and excavations carried on within the last century in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and Syria, a wealth of new information has become available. This new light from extrabiblical texts has served not only to enlarge immeasurably the horizon for a knowl¬ edge of the ancient Near East, but it has also sharpened considerably the understanding of the content of the Bible itself. Scribal Habits in Near Eastern Manuscript Traditions [Hardback]. George Kiraz (Editor); Sabine Schmidtke (Editor). £85.00. Beth Qaá¹raye: A Lexical and Toponymical Survey [Hardback]. Mario Kozah (Author); George Kiraz (Author); Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn (Author); Haya Thani (Author); Saif Al-Murikhi (Author). £74.00. Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament edited by James B. Pritchard (1st ed. 1950, 2nd ed.1955, 3rd ed. 1969) is an anthology of important historical, legal, mythological, liturgical, and secular texts from the ancient Near East. In spite of the name, the included texts have broad coverage and do not necessarily relate to the Old Testament. William W. Hallo, writing in the Journal of the American Oriental Society in 1970, described it as "a modern classic ever since its first...