Gábor Zólyomi:

The Vase Inscription of Lugal-zagesi and the History of his Reign

Ancient Mesopotamia has yielded more than 300,000 cuneiform documents, written in one of the two main languages of the area, Sumerian or Akkadian. The next period and place from which a roughly similar amount of documents is known is medieval Europe. In spite of this wealth of written sources, writing the political history of any periods of ancient Mesopotamia offers a serious challenge. This is only partly due to the fact that approximately 90 percent of the texts known are administrative documents, which record the transfer of goods. The main reason appears to be the lack of historical narratives in the sense of the Western tradition, i.e. the lack of stories with a beginning, middle, and an end.

Royal inscriptions are one group of texts that has been extensively used as sources of Mesopotamian history, as these are kind of texts that remind us of narratives. My research project is on the narrative structure of the royal inscriptions dating to the 3rd millennium BC written in Sumerian. This corpus consists of approximately 900 texts. The texts designated here as royal inscriptions are votive or commemorative texts recording various events (e.g. building or ritual activities, military conflicts etc.). This type of texts emerged without any known precedent in the middle of the 3rd millennium BC after more than 600 years of literacy in ancient Mesopotamia. These texts as a rule are written on objects, which are made of a permanent material and are meant to be placed in a sacred space (e.g. before a deity) or to be part of a religious building (bricks, boulders, vessels, mace-heads, clay coins or pegs, stelae, statues etc.). They range from simple one sentence dedicatory inscriptions to complex accounts of military conflicts between neighboring polities.

In this talk first I will describe the purposes royal inscription were produced to serve, which are in some kind of conflict with their use in the reconstruction of the political history of 3rd millennium Mesopotamia. In the second part of my talk I will discuss the way royal inscriptions are utilized by historians, using the vase inscription of Lugal-zagesi, an important ruler from the 24th c. BC, as an example.

Those who wish to attend the seminar are kindly asked to read the texts of the attached handout beforehand.
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