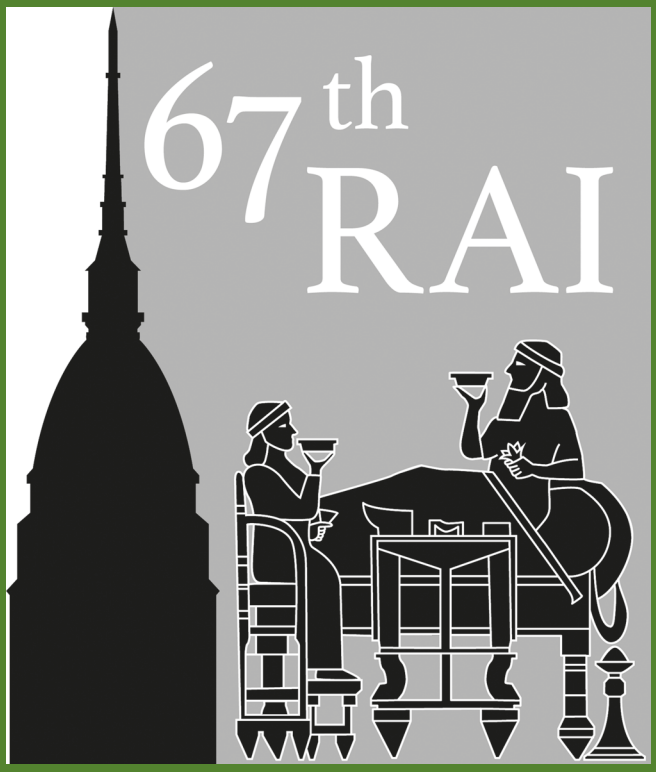

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Preliminary Results of the Project
Geomapping Landscapes of Writing

Seraina Nett / *Gustav Ryberg Smidt* / *Carolin Johansson* / *Rune Rattenborg*

1. Introduction

The present paper gives an overview of the aims and preliminary findings of *Geomapping Landscapes of Writing* (GLoW), a research project funded by Riksbankens Jubilæumsfond for the Advancement of the Humanities and Social Sciences (MXM19–1160:1) and hosted by the Department of Linguistics and Philology of Uppsala University, Sweden. GLoW is headed by Jakob Andersson, with Seraina Nett and Rune Rattenborg as researchers and Carolin Johansson and Gustav Ryberg Smidt as research assistants. As the project at the time of writing is still in its initial stages, our review will focus on the general aims and methodology of our work, as well as present some provisional results, namely a first look at an updated estimate of the total number of cuneiform inscriptions known and the archaeological locations from which they derive, and a case study to illustrate the kind of information that can be extracted from data collected by the project.

The core aim of the project is, firstly, to assemble a comprehensive metadata index, namely attribute (i.e., the specific characteristics of a given text), bibliographical, geographical and chronological metadata, of all cuneiform texts currently known from digital or analogue resources, and secondly, to make as large a part as possible of the resulting dataset publicly available through collaboration with existing open access digital catalogues (in particular, the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative), and thirdly to conduct a number of smaller exploratory analyses of a quantitative as well as a qualitative nature based on the assembled dataset. Incorporating perspectives from cuneiform studies and landscape archaeology coupled with the extensive use of a variety of data applications for the management and analysis of structured data, the project is highly interdisciplinary, situated at the intersection between philology, archaeology, and digital humanities.

The project data structure mimics the core data structure of the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative in order to facilitate easy sharing and integration of data, further data compatibility and exchange between repositories, and bolster long-term sustainability of the collected data. Through the conscious adaptation of our

data collection efforts to the structure of existing key repositories in the field, as well as through maintaining cross-reference capability between different datasets, we hope that the project will contribute to the overall integration and standardisation of primary catalogue data over the long term. Our focus as far as data collection is concerned lies with basic attribute variables, e.g., material, artefact type, genre, language, and script, as well as the formalised recording of object provenience and dating. The metadata assembled during the course of the project will be integrated into the Cuneiform Digital Library online repository after the conclusion of the data collection efforts.

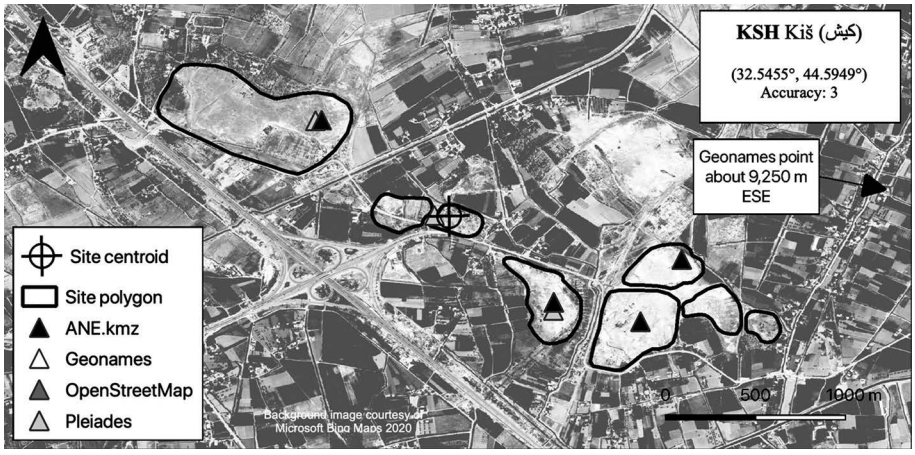

Fig. 1: Select open access geodata records for the site of ancient Kiš, c. 85 kilometres south of Baghdād, Iraq. Records captured 20 August 2020. Background image courtesy of Google Maps. Map by Rune Rattenborg.

Whereas concepts and vocabularies for basic categorical attribute data are relatively well-established within the domain of cuneiform studies, the formation of high-quality data relating to the spatial and temporal location of inscriptions require a significant degree of curating. Procedures and requirements for defining and generating geodata, for example, are often poorly documented or employing opaque definitions of accuracy and certainty.[1] For example, geodata on the location of even major and well-known archaeological sites in the Middle East available from current spatial data repositories such as Google Maps, OpenStreetMap, Geonames or Wikipedia display considerable spatial variation (Fig. 1). Establishing a more robust set of geographical data for archaeological sites as done during the course of the GLoW project (available in Rattenborg *et al*., 2021b) improves the accuracy of the analyses conducted and provides a more secure framework to make archaeological sites more easily accessible when using digital geographical

[1] For a detailed discussion, see Goodchild, 2007.

tools (e.g., Google Earth, Pleiades) and satellite images.

Chronological data, similarly, is still served mainly through cultural-historical period designations that are defined with reference to a relatively small part of the overall area in which cuneiform inscriptions are distributed.[2] Considering the relatively high degree of chronological accuracy that can be assigned to cuneiform inscriptions, using variables such as date formulas, rulers identified, archaeological context or palaeographical characteristics, even basic revision of temporal data coupled with the aforementioned geodata collection is bound to produce a much more versatile and potent catalogue going forward.

The analytical perspectives enabled through a formalised and consistent mapping of long-term and large-scale trends and patterns in the composition and distribution of the cuneiform corpus are, we would suggest, immense. A comprehensive index of basic metadata variables will allow for easy and consistent querying of prevalence and prominence of, e.g., text genres across space and time, a range of novel and macrohistorical perspectives on text and material culture, e.g., the relationship between large urban settlements and text assemblages, aspects of literacy, the use of cuneiform vis-à-vis other scripts, the materiality of the inscriptions, and so on.

Most importantly, our project serves to further the comprehensive and sustained documentation of cuneiform as a discrete and unique body of world written heritage, and an integral element of the archaeological record of the Middle East.

2. Distribution of cuneiform texts

To provide some illustration of the geographical extent of our data collection efforts, we present here the initial results of a survey of cuneiform finds conducted by Gustav Ryberg Smidt during 2020 and early 2021. This survey was undertaken as an initial part of our work programme in order to provide a clearer basis for metadata collection efforts by producing a provisional estimate of known finds of cuneiform inscriptions, their overall number at any one archaeological site, and pertinent bibliographical references from which these numbers were sourced. Previous estimates, compiled most recently by Peust (2000) and, more thoroughly, by Streck (2010) have pointed to an overall corpus size of ca. 500,000 and 533,800 cuneiform texts, respectively. The number of unique records currently available from the Cuneiform Digital Library amounts to 341,342 (as of August 2020), of which 246,743 are assigned to a known provenience. It should be noted that the figures assembled by Streck relied primarily on records in museum inventories, as well as print and digital scholarly publications, whereas our survey deals exclusively with figures given for known archaeological locations to which individ-

[2] For an attempt to integrate the regional chronologies of West Asia and neighbouring regions in the 3rd millennium, for example, see the results of the ARCANE project, in particular Sallaberger / Schrakamp, 2015 for the textual evidence.

ual inscriptions can be assigned with a relatively high level of certainty and therefore does not include texts with unknown or unclear provenience.

The estimates included in our index are based on compiled or overall estimates from specialist literature, and so make no distinction between published and unpublished objects, or whether these objects have been unearthed through scientific excavation or clandestinely. Our definition of 'cuneiform writing' for this purpose has been kept intentionally broad, also including derived scripts such as Ugaritic and Old Persian, but disregarding other contemporary scripts.[3] This leads to a number of idiosyncrasies within our dataset, as, for example, Cuneiform Luwian is included, whereas its Hieroglyphic counterpart is not. To the extent possible, our notion of an inscription includes every discrete archaeological object carrying an inscription, also if the text is a duplicate. Inscribed bricks with identical inscriptions, for example, are counted as separate objects. Joining fragments, on the other hand, count as one text, as far as it is possible to identify and track such joins.

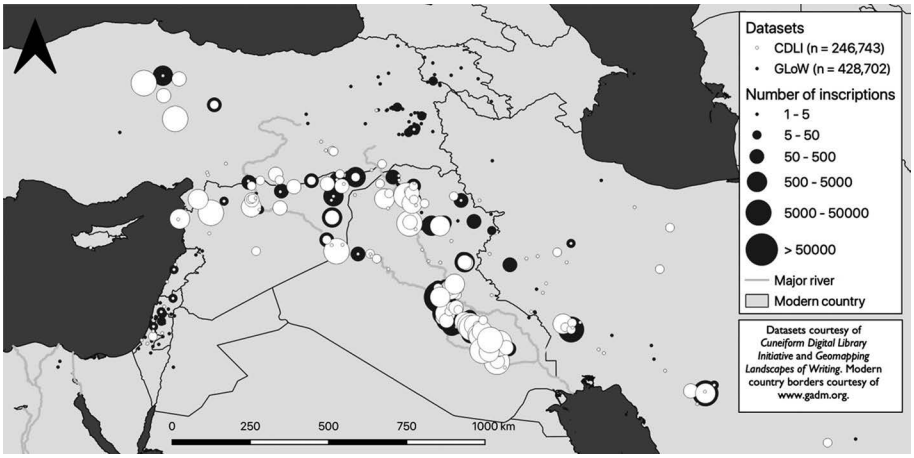

Fig. 2: Numerical and geographical distribution of records, juxtaposing the estimated numbers from the GLoW index (grey) with the texts currently recorded in the CDLI (white). CDLI dataset acquired August 2020.

Our index of archaeological sites with cuneiform finds is compiled from a base index developed as part of *Memories For Life*, a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council for 2017–2021 and led by Jakob Andersson and Christina Tsouparopoulou. This index has been further augmented based on provenience values from a variety of digital and analogue catalogues. Each record has been thoroughly checked and referenced through the consultation of excavation reports, text editions, and museum catalogues. The current version of the index

[3] For reasons of consistency, following the definition laid out in Edzard, 1980: 545.

stands at 428.702 textual records distributed over 544 discrete archaeological locations.[4] The geographical spread is quite extensive, reaching from Civita Castellana in central Italy[5] to Kabul in northeastern Afghanistan,[6] and from the suburbs of Orsk in central Russia[7] to Edfu in southern Egypt.[8] Additional finds from the extreme periphery of the corpus include inscriptions found in Malta, Greece, and elsewhere in southeastern Europe, as well as various locations in Central Asia, predominantly Iran and Afghanistan. Together, these outliers form a broad peripheral zone that should of course not be taken as indicative of the extent of cuneiform writing per se. If we look at sites within southwest Asia itself – or the area that we may call the 'cuneiform world' – the number and density of sites is, however, quite impressive, also outside the traditional core areas in southern and central Iraq. While certainly minor compared to the immense textual assemblages found at principal sites in the alluvial south, the regularity with which smaller finds of cuneiform writing occur in adjoining areas across the Fertile Crescent and along major infrastructural nodes in the Iranian highlands suggests a much more prevalent corpus than what is typically implied by general readers.

To illustrate this further, the second data series on the distribution map introduces similar estimates derived from the CDLI catalogue for comparison. As can be seen, a larger number of finds included in our survey is not found in the CDLI dataset, indicating a strong – and very understandable – bias towards major text assemblages from core areas of the cuneiform world in the latter database. While we would like to stress that our work is not intended to duplicate existing data collections, and without detracting from the efforts of current digital text catalogues, these figures suggest significant room for further augmenting and expanding existing data repositories in order to provide a comprehensive catalogue of the corpus.

3. Using text metadata

We would now like to consider a subset of our current project database that will allow us to explore and demonstrate the types of analyses that can be undertaken based on this material. We focus on assemblages from seventeen archaeological locations in the area around Ur and Uruk as our programme of data collection for this particular area has been largely completed. As such, this subset will serve as

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[4] The collected geodata is freely available online in Rattenborg *et al*., 2021b, the overarching methodology is discussed in greater detail in Rattenborg *et al*., 2021a.

[5] An inscription, likely Neo-Babylonian in date, on a vessel fragment found in a tomb at the site of Falerii, published in Cristofani / Fronzaroli, 1971.

[6] Two signs, possibly Elamite, on a silver fragment that forms part of a Persian-period hoard, see Hulin, 1954.

[7] A vessel with a short trilingual Old Persian-Elamite-Babylonian inscription dating to the Persian period, see Savelyeva / Smirnov, 1972.

[8] Michaelidis, 1943.

an example of data-driven perspectives that the project aims to apply across the entire cuneiform corpus once the project data collection programme has been completed.

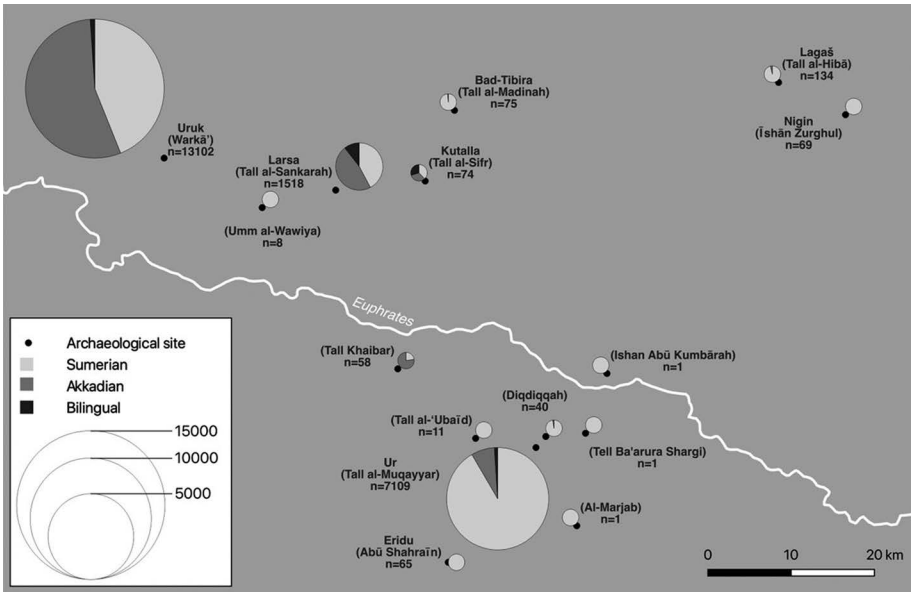

Fig. 3: Distribution of Sumerian, Akkadian, and bilingual texts in the Ur-Uruk region, based on the records in the GLoW database. Map by Carolin Johansson and Rune Rattenborg.

Taking language distribution as our starting point (Fig. 3), the present map plots percentages for Sumerian, Akkadian, and bilinguals for each assemblage. The picture that emerges is not particularly surprising, underscoring as it is the strong predominance of Sumerian inscriptions in the far south of the alluvium. Of some interest is Tall Khaibar, which includes a sizeable proportion of Sumerian-language texts dating to the later second millennium BCE.[9] Language distribution also ties in rather neatly with the chronological distribution of inscriptions from the same general region (Fig. 4). In the following map we have, for reasons of clarity, separated the available records into two phases, before and after the Old Babylonian period. Unsurprisingly, sites with a high proportion of Sumerian-language texts in the previous map dominate the earlier chronological phase, with the exception of Ur. The difference here can be ascribed to the presence of Sumerian-language school texts from later periods. Moreover, the chronological distri-

[9] The Sumerian-language texts from Tall Khaibar are part of a group of school texts from the elementary curriculum, including lexical lists. For the Tall Khaibar texts, see Campbell *et al*., 2017: 28–32.

bution also illustrates the relative decline of the region in the south and population shifts occurring in the middle of the second millennium BCE.

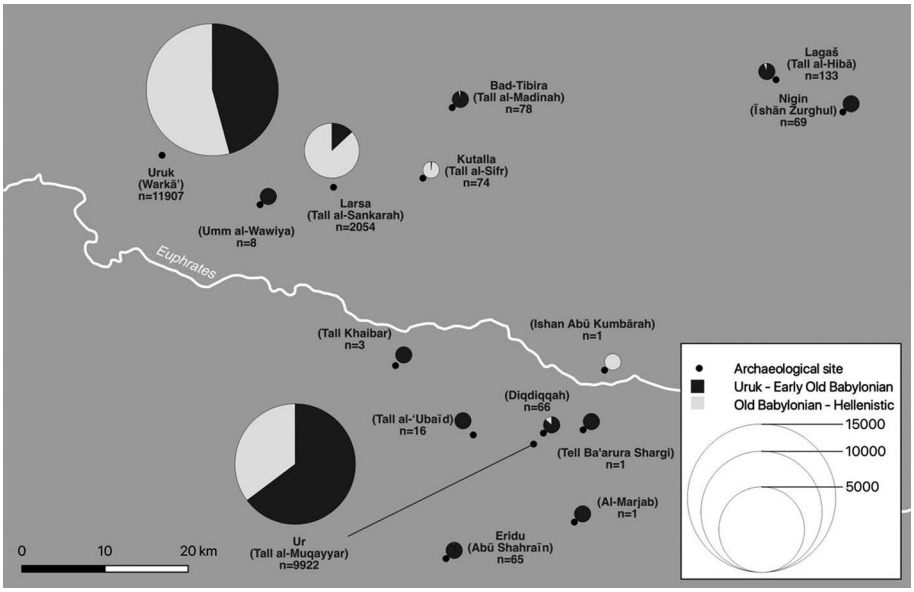

Fig. 4: Chronological distribution of text finds in the Ur-Uruk region, based on the records in the GLoW database. Map by Carolin Johansson and Rune Rattenborg.

A third relevant variable is the distribution of genres at different sites (Figs. 5–6). What becomes immediately evident is the significant degree of variability of genres, particularly in larger assemblages, such as Ur, Uruk, and Larsa. Tall Khaibar, again, stands out due to the number of school texts unearthed at this site, which also serves to explain the larger proportion of Sumerian texts from later periods noted previously. Looking at most prominent categories, the present chart (Fig. 6) shows the distribution of the most important genres (administrative and royal inscriptions, the total number of records in other genres, and uncertain genre records) on a logarithmic scale. The most obvious outliers include sites with finds only of royal inscriptions, e.g., Bad-Tibira and Nigin, typically stemming from surface finds of bricks and similar building inscriptions. The relatively similar distribution of main text genres seen for Ur and Uruk can, on closer inspection, be seen to hold marked differences in the distribution of genres. Ur, in particular, includes a large number of uncertain records, as well as a large number of royal inscriptions. The latter is certainly to be expected, considering the role of Ur as a capital city and the general bias of the sample towards earlier periods.

Of course, this case study addresses a very homogeneous area that is well-studied, but it is nevertheless interesting to note how even in this small sample, a number of interesting observations can be made – such as the appearance of the 2nd millennium Sumerian school texts from Ur and Tell Khaibar – which then

have to be further explained by looking at the textual record from individual sites in greater detail.

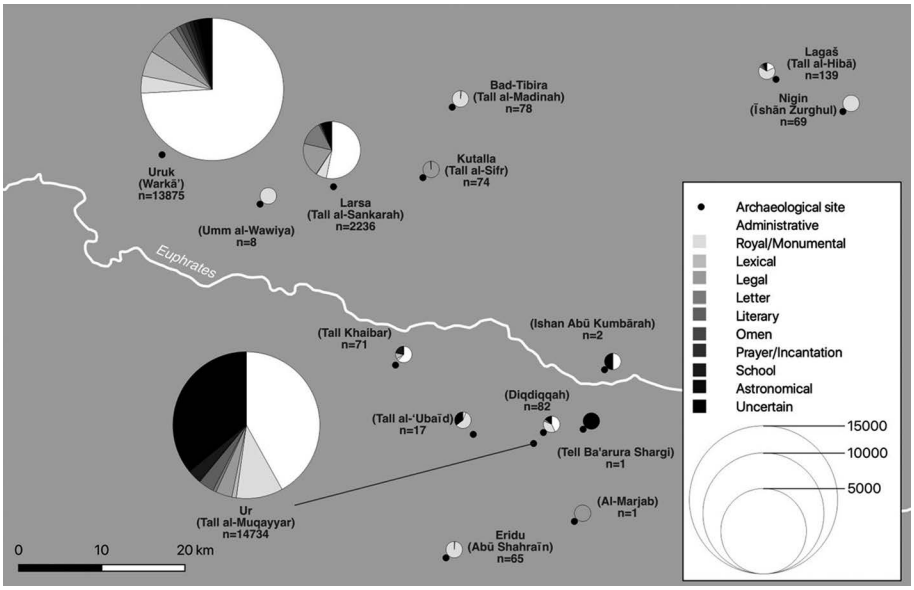

Fig. 5: Texts in the Ur-Uruk region distributed according to genre, based on the records in the GLoW database. Map by Carolin Johansson and Rune Rattenborg.

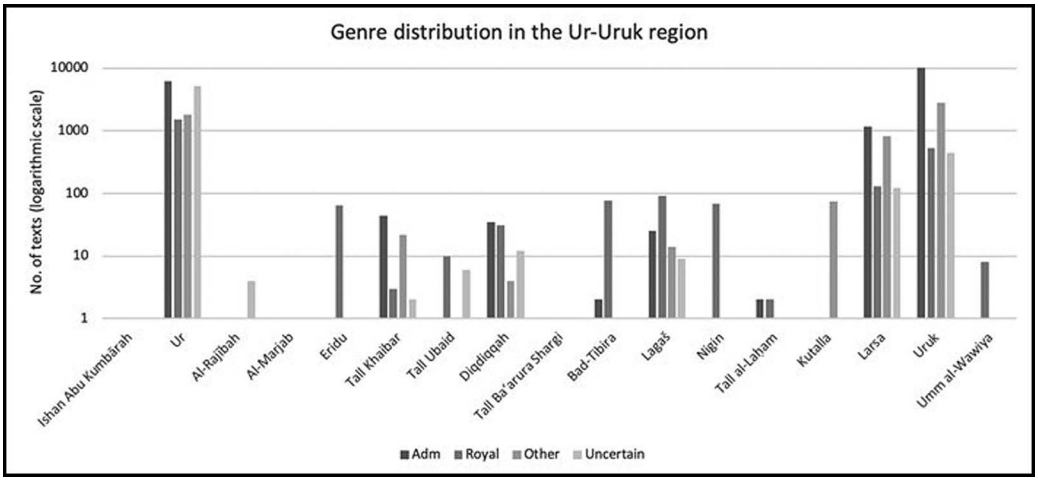

Fig. 6: The comparative distribution of the most important genres among the sites of the Ur-Uruk region (logarithmic scale).

4. Further perspectives

These examples have, we hope, served to demonstrate the uses and types of analyses that can be conducted with the data collected by the GLoW project, and how detailed and comprehensive metadata may open up a variety of new avenues for research of a quantitative as well as a qualitative nature. This approach is bound to be particularly rewarding at regional and interregional levels of inquiry. The example of language distribution may, for example, look entirely different from the area around Ur and Uruk presented here when queried for other regions in a larger perspective. A review of material or artefact type distribution in one or several regions over time may bring out broader trends in the use of writing in a variety of historical settings, for example in terms of the relationship between genre, language, and writing material. In turn, the example of the Ur-Uruk region outlined above also reinforces how crucial it is to complement these types of macro-analyses with an in-depth view of the evidence at hand. Thus, combining metadata distribution with archaeological survey data through geolocation can offer further insights on the broader patterns that can be observed at the intersection between material culture and texts and open up new avenues for further research.

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