

Cunéiforme sur tablette et téléphone: une histoire de technologies d'enseignement dans l'antiquité et la modernité

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Cuneiform is supposedly one of the most complex scripts of antiquity, and yet it endured for over 3000 years in its heartland of southern Iraq. At its most widespread, in the later second millennium BC, communities across the Middle East—from western Iran to Cyprus, via Egypt and Anatolia—wrote to each other, and for themselves, in cuneiform script. In these lectures, I suggest that cuneiform was not as hard to learn as we moderns have thought. If that is so, how can we use these historical insights, and new technologies, to improve our own teaching methods, in universities and beyond?



Lectures 1 & 2: Antiquity

1. Who could read, write and calculate in cuneiform in the early second millennium BC? Over the past 25 years historians have challenged old assumptions that it was a purely male, professional business. However, some certainties have remained: that it was a primarily urban phenomenon, that schooling took place at home, and that the marshland communities of southern Iraq were essentially non-literate for several hundred years from the late 18th century BC. However, new excavations at Tell Khaiber in southern Iraq have produced unprecedented, archaeologically contextualised evidence for non-professional, rural cuneiform literacy in this supposed 'dark age'. This encourages us to re-evaluate the sociology of writing across the cuneiform world.

2. With the spread of easily-learned alphabets across the Middle East in the early first millennium BC, cuneiform retreated to its heartland of southern Iraq. In the early fifth century BC, Babylonian revolts against the Achaemenid empire led to serious reprisals against the urban elite. Yet cuneiform culture endured, in some circles, for another five centuries. Was it now a symbol of political resistance or merely a forgotten cultural backwater? How did the pedagogy of cuneiform adapt to these huge cultural and political changes and what finally caused it to fail? Alongside traditional historical methods, computational analysis of texts can help to reveal some answers.

Lectures 3 & 4: Modernity

3. The modern decipherment of cuneiform was famously a pan-European exercise of the mid-nineteenth century. The first cuneiform text-book was Friedrich Delitzsch's *Assyrische Lesestücke* of 1876, which went through five editions by 1912. The same methods of learning cuneiform, through systematic study of grammar before reading of standard 'set texts', is still ubiquitous in universities today. What can we learn from developments in research on effective pedagogy, online and face-to-face? And do the latest historical insights into how the ancients learned cuneiform have anything to offer modern university teachers?

4. If, in antiquity, cuneiform was more socially and geographically widespread than we thought, what of its accessibility to learners today? Barriers to learning remain high, especially in war-torn Syria and Iraq where cuneiform culture is local history. There is currently enormous international support for the documentation and conservation of these countries' material remains. How do we now help to rebuild local expertise on their interpretation and contextualisation? An important component must surely be to help build meaningful, useable methods and tools for teaching cuneiform script in Arabic, so that ancient Middle Eastern languages can become local languages once again.