

SAW Seminar History and Philosophy of Mathematics

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Tabular Mathematic Texts from Ur and Elsewhere in the Old Babylonian Period

Abstract

In the Old Babylonian period Southern Mesopotamia (the first half of the 2nd millennium Southern Iraq) tabular texts appear as part of the scribal curriculum to organize data used in calculations. The city of Ur, an ancient port city and economic center, offers many examples of these tabular calculations. However, in each example we only see numbers represented and no text. Thus, the textual context of these calculations is uncertain. This presentation examines these tabular texts, exploring both their ancient context as well as how they have been examined by modern scholars. It will show that focusing on the potential textual context should be secondary to the layout of the texts, that this layout informs us of how calculation was perceived and thus informs us of how calculation may have been understood and then carried out in the various economic texts of southern Mesopotamia.