

SAW Seminar History and Philosophy of Mathematics

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Error and Uncertainty in Ancient Texts

Abstract

In studying the numerous cuneiform tablets produced in ancient Mesopotamia, modern scholars will often attribute an error visible in calculation to a mistake made by an ancient scribe. However, little study has been done concerning the nature of these apparent numeric errors. This presentation will examine numeric errors in these ancient texts, focusing on texts from the early Old Babylonian period (first quarter of the 2nd millennium BCE) and originating in the kingdom of Larsa (modern southern Iraq). In particular, it will explore four questions:

- Can we understand how the ancient Mesopotamians understood and manipulated measurements and other numbers using approximations?
- Can we even detect errors to begin with?
- Can we differentiate between a simple mistake and an approximation?
- What kinds of approximations are visible in the texts?

By the end of the talk it will be shown that error is not so easily defined – some errors attributed to scribal mistakes were, in fact, intentional and thus not mistakes while other, apparently correct calculations, could hide an error.