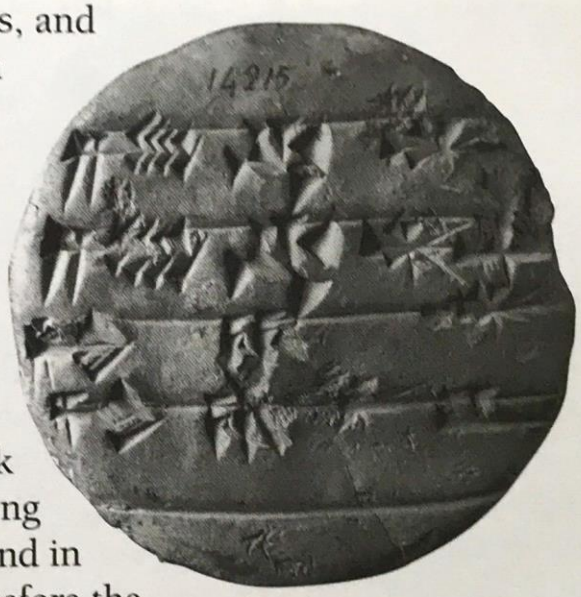
CHAPTER 14

SCRIBES, SCHOOL, AND SCHOOLBOYS

EDUCATION IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

"Schooldays," Iraq, around 2000 BCE

I got up early in the morning. I turned to my mother and said: "Give me my lunch. I want to go to school." My mother gave me two rolls, and I set out. . . . In the school, the man in charge of punctuality demanded, "Why are you late?" Afraid and with a pounding heart, I went to my teacher and made a respectful bow.



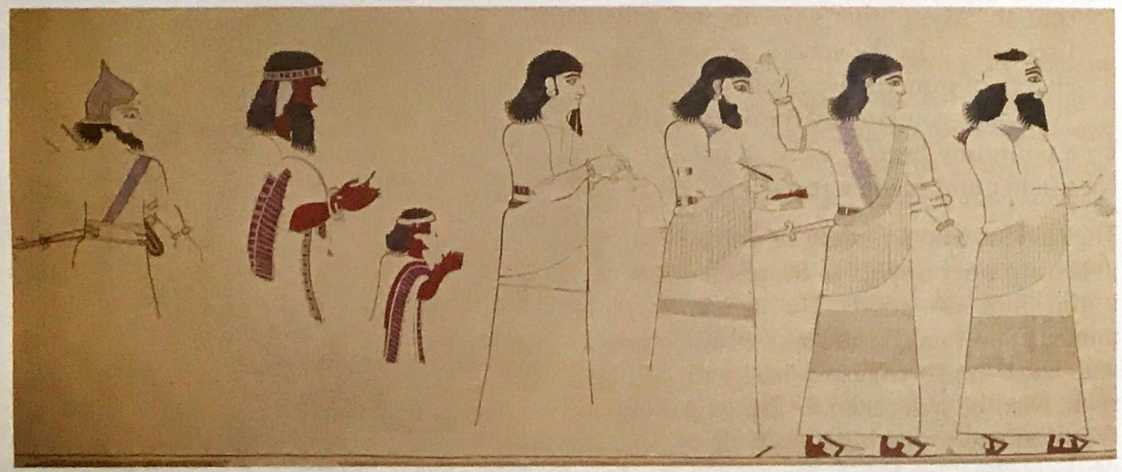
Schoolchildren learned to write by copying lines of cuneiform. The teacher wrote the first and third lines on this tablet, and a student wrote on the second and fourth lines.

The student who wrote these words tried to show proper respect to his teacher, but it did him no good. The headmaster immediately found a mistake in his work and caned him—whacked him with a long stick. Next he was caned for hanging around in the street and for being sloppily dressed. Before the day was done, the boy had been caned nine times, once for messy handwriting and later for talking during class. He was punished for speaking in his native language of Akkadian rather than Sumerian, the official language of the school. He stood up when he shouldn't have and later left the building without permission. The poor guy couldn't do anything right that day! So many people seemed to be watching and waiting for him to make a mistake—not just teachers and the headmaster (the "school father"). Older students, called "big brothers," also disciplined the younger students and made them behave.

Who was this boy? In many ways, he sounds like a modern student on a *really* bad day. But he wasn't. He lived in ancient Sumer around 2000 BCE, and when he grew up, he became a scribe. This story became a school exercise for

students to copy, and archaeologists have found lots of copies among the thousands of tablets that have survived from these ancient times. Was it used as a warning or did teachers and students laugh about the kid who kept messing up?

Only wealthy parents could afford to send their children to the scribal schools in Mesopotamia. (*Scribe* literally means "one who writes.") Reading and writing prepared students to become well-paid professionals: scribes, doctors, judges, priests, and astronomers.



A scribe (third from right) holds a tablet in his left hand and a stylus in his right. He may have just been summoned by the king to take dictation.

Almost all the students were boys. In the thousands of years of Mesopotamia's history, a few women became scribes, but not many. Most women worked at home and were not expected to have professions. The few female scribes that we know of generally worked for other women: queens, princesses, and priestesses. Historians don't know if they went to the scribal schools with the boys or if they were trained by older women scribes. We know nothing about these women except their names.

Clay tablets—student workbooks—have told us a lot about the lives of the male students. Some were the sons and grandsons of scribes; others were the sons of kings, officials, and merchants. But not all wealthy parents sent their sons to school. Most of them saw no need to learn to read and write. Why bother when they could afford to hire scribes to do these things *for* them? So only a tiny percentage of the population went to school. Most boys, especially the poor ones, had no choice but to spend their days working in the fields with their brothers or learning the trades of their fathers.

Almost everything that happened in the scribal schools involved tablets. In fact, the school itself was called an *edubba* or "tablet house." All day, every day—except for a lunch break—the students used their clay tablets. They spent long hours on vocabulary, learning to recognize and write the cuneiform signs that were used in writing the Sumerian and Akkadian languages. Most people spoke Akkadian in their everyday lives. But boys in scribal schools learned to speak and write Sumerian because it was the official language for contracts, letters, and temple documents—and because it was used in the temples to speak to the gods.

Boys probably started school when they were quite young and finished in their late teens. Their studies must have been pretty boring, by modern standards. There were no sports, arts, or crafts to break up the day, and no classes in history or science either. The students learned language, literature, mathematics, and music, almost all through memorization.

When they were first learning to write, students copied simple lines of cuneiform that the teacher had written out. Later on, they copied popular myths and legends, and their copies are our best sources for the stories that had been passed down for many generations. In language study, the boys memorized lists of Sumerian words with the Akkadian words that meant the same thing. They recited the words, then practiced writing them. The lists weren't in alphabetical order, but in groups—names of animals, foods, or body parts, for example.

The students sat on brick benches as they wrote on round tablets of soft clay with a stylus, a pointed writing tool made from a reed. Their strict teachers ordered harsh punishments, but the rewards of education were great. A boy who studied hard could become an important, respected

MATHEMATICS, MESOPOTAMIAN STYLE

Mesopotamian mathematics was based on 60, instead of 10, as ours is. In some ways, it makes sense because 60 can be divided by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, and 12, and the Mesopotamians used a lot of fractions. (Ten can only be divided by 2 and 5.) Students, then as now, used mathematical tables to help them with multiplication, square roots, and exponents. The remains of Mesopotamian math are hiding in our modern clocks and calendars. Our 60-second minute, 60-minute hour, and 360-degree circle are all legacies from ancient Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamians also gave us the idea of place notation when we write numbers: putting ones in one column, tens in another column, hundreds in another, and so on.

Mesopotamian mathematicians could calculate area, even of irregular shapes like the one plotted on this tablet from 2100 BCE. When a field was sold, the contract often listed its area.

man like Pagirum, a scribe who lived around 1650 BCE. Pagirum was self-employed. He earned a living by writing letters or contracts for people who couldn't read or write for themselves. He knew how to use proper legal language and could take dictation, quickly writing down another person's words as he spoke. He understood enough mathematics to survey houses and fields to calculate their sizes when they were about to be sold or divided among family members.

Not all scribes were equally good at their duties. In an ancient text that was often copied by schoolboys, one scribe made fun of another scribe: "When you write a document, it makes no sense. When you write a letter, it's unreadable. You try to divide up an estate, but you can't do it . . . you can't even hold the measuring line. . . . You don't know how to work with arguing clients, and you make the trouble worse between quarreling brothers."

"The Disputation between Enkimansi and Girnishag," Iraq, around 2000 BCE

Although most of Pagirum's clients were ordinary citizens, he probably worked for the king occasionally, too. After many years in his profession—perhaps Pagirum was an old man by then—the local king rewarded him, "Ammimadar, the king . . . gave these fields to Pagirum, his servant." With this gift of 51 acres, he could grow food to support his family. A different scribe drew up this contract, listing the fields, their sizes, locations, and borders. He wrote that if anyone else tried to claim Pagirum's land, he would owe "ten pounds of silver to the palace, and hot asphalt will be smeared on his head."

Royal land gift contract, Syria, around 1650 BCE

Pagirum had benefited all his life from his schooling, just as a Mesopotamian riddle said he would: "He whose eyes are not open enters it. He whose eyes are wide open comes out of it." What is it?

"School."

Riddle, Iraq, date unknown