

Workshop Cultures of Computation and Quantification

Abstract

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Conversions in the Old Assyrian trade documentation (19th century BCE)

All the Old Assyrian (19th century BCE) school tablets with a round shape contain small arithmetic exercises directly related to the merchant profession. Most of these tablets, being reused as building material, have been discovered in the middle Assyrian houses of Aššur. There are only two known arithmetic school tablets from Kaniš bearing the same type of exercises as those of Aššur. In these tablets, the scribe had to calculate the weight of silver necessary for the purchase of a known weight of another metal. The few samples of Old Assyrian school texts discovered fit quite well with the basic needs of the merchants. Indeed, such conversions were daily made by the inhabitants of Kaniš as witness their archives. A systematic analysis of these computations highlights the existence of errors, when the exchange rate does not correspond to a regular number, or the use of rounding, living aside small weights of metal. It also shows that merchants might have computing each unit separately.