

Hittite and Sumerian: The search for deeper meanings

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By the late 2nd millennium BC Sumerian had definitively died out as a spoken language but continued in use as a language of scholarship throughout the cuneiform world. Bizarrely phrased scholastic Sumerian compositions such as the “Scholars of Uruk” witness this development already in the Old Babylonian period in Mesopotamia. This and certain other learned compositions propagate a view of Sumerian as a language of the obscure, comprehensible only to the initiated, and are written in a language constructed on the basis of lexical lists and other school texts. There was thus absolutely no chance that there was any language contact between Hittite and Sumerian speakers during the Late Bronze Age. What then was the use-context of Sumerian texts at Hattusa? Were scribes on the geographical edge of the cuneiform world indulging in the same kind of hermeneutic use of Sumerian as some of their Mesopotamian counterparts?