

# PART I



## AN ESSAY IN BABYLONIAN EPISTEMOLOGY



## CHAPTER 1

# At the Time of Creation

### I Read, Therefore I Am

When the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily wrote his *Library of History* in the first century BC—a universal history in the sense that he mentioned Egyptians and other “barbarians” briefly before embarking on a detailed account of Greeks and Romans from the Trojan War until his own time—he made only a few remarks about the Chaldeans, who were, he said, the most ancient inhabitants of Babylonia. Unlike the Assyrians and Medes he had just discussed, Diodorus found the Chaldeans interesting not because of their military feats, but because, “being assigned to the service of the gods, they spend their entire life philosophizing, their greatest renown being in the field of astrology” (Diodorus II 29.2). Many modern translators of this passage avoid the term “philosophize” and prefer the broader word “study,” but the original Greek is precise. The text uses the verb *filosofeo*, to love knowledge and pursue it. Diodorus did not, then, share the modern reluctance to grant those outside the western tradition the ability to practice philosophy. Hegel’s notorious dismissal of non-European thought in his *Philosophy of History*—China’s philosophy was alien to anything that relates to the Spirit and India’s was dream-like—may no longer be universally shared, and the concept of world philosophies may now finally be breaking the Eurocentric barrier.<sup>1</sup> Still, rare are the students of philosophy who consider the Near Eastern traditions that dominated the eastern Mediterranean world for millennia before the Classical Greeks. I say rare because there is an increasing awareness of a Near Eastern background to ancient Greek culture, including its philosophy, in which the clearest traces of such influence appear in the pre-Socratic corpus. A recent authoritative handbook on that corpus, for example, includes an essay that points out how ideas from the East inspired early Greek thought.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of the essay is fully on content, not on form, as especially in the area of cosmogony it is clear that Hesiod and others knew of earlier Near Eastern traditions. Egyptians, Babylonians, Hittites, Hebrews, and some of their neighbors left behind engaging works of literature that illustrate their perceptions on how everything came into being. The ideas were very diverse even within the individual cultures, but undoubtedly elements from them reached the Greek world. The parallels between Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Hittite *Kumarbi Cycle* are so obvious that few would deny that the Greek author was aware of the Anatolian tradition.<sup>3</sup>

A closer look at the most elaborate discussion of cosmogony from the Near East shows that we deny it full credit by focusing on such details of content alone, however. The *Babylonian Creation Myth*—a modern title for a poem known in Mesopotamian antiquity as *Enūma eliš*, its first two words—relates how the universe evolved from nothingness to an organized structure with the city of Babylon at its center. When the primordial sweet and salt waters—male Apsu and female Tiamat—mingled, two beings appeared: Lahmu and Laḥamu, that is, mud and muddy. The image suits the southern Babylonian view over the Persian Gulf perfectly: when the sea recedes, mud arises.<sup>4</sup> A chain reaction had started: the male and female heavenly and earthly horizons brought about by the mud flats gave birth to the god of heaven, and in due course other gods came into being, as well as conflict between them. Soon the *prima materia* sweet water Apsu tried to destroy his offspring for the noise they made, but Ea, the god of wisdom, cast a spell on him and killed him. Henceforth Apsu was the name of the waters beneath the earth in whose midst Ea established his house. There the god's wife Damkina gave birth to Marduk, a raucous youth whose games so disturbed the *prima materia* salt water Tiamat that she too wanted to rid herself of all others. This time Marduk was the gods' champion, and the tale details how he battled Tiamat's ghouls. Victorious, he used Tiamat's body to create the heavenly sky, in which he organized the stars and the progression of time:

He made the position(s) for the great gods,  
He established (in) constellations the stars, their likeness.  
He marked the year, described (its) boundaries,  
He set up twelve months of three stars each.

Marduk brought order into the universe, assigned gods their places in heaven and the netherworld, and made the Tigris and Euphrates rivers

flow using Tiamat's eyes as the sources from which their waters arose. As his last act he created humankind, who "shall bear the gods' burden that those may rest." In gratitude the other gods elected Marduk their king and built Babylon as his resplendent residence, the place where they could gather in assembly.<sup>5</sup>

One could say that creation was complete at this point in the poem, and many modern summaries of the *Enūma eliš* indeed portray the subsequent lines as a liturgical praise of the god Marduk, an appendix.<sup>6</sup> So far the tale revealed a wealth of ideas about creation current at least among some Babylonians. As the *Enūma eliš* was recited during the New Year's festival when the gods met to renew Marduk's kingship, we imagine that its contents had official sanction, but we cannot say that its ideas were exclusive. Some aspects are clear: water was the *prima materia*, intercourse between male and female elements led to a lineage of gods, and generational conflict caused change. In the *Enūma eliš* progress was the result of younger gods pacifying the chaos their ancestors generated. Parallels with pre-Socratic Greek ideas are obvious: Thales too regarded water as the basis of all else, and Hesiod's *Theogony* portrayed progress as the result of generational conflict and parricide.

When ending our reading of the *Enūma eliš* at this point, it is easy to conclude that the concepts it expresses are in the domain of myth rather than reason. They explain natural phenomena, such as the Tigris and Euphrates rivers or the movements of stars and planets, as the outcome of a divine act. No other rationale was needed. Read this way, the poem belongs "before philosophy," as in the title of a popular book from the 1940s that studied "the intellectual adventure of ancient man" through the mythologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The collection of essays—admirable in many respects and naturally a product of its time, the mid-twentieth century—discusses at length mythopoeic thought, speculation that "was not restricted by a scientific (that is, a disciplined) search for truth."<sup>7</sup> And indeed these ancient peoples did not present a systematic analysis of the origins of the universe and its structure that uses the principles we today see as essential for scientific explanation. Nor did they analyze other topics with the methods Greeks started to develop so thoroughly in the sixth century BC and which we see as foundational for western rationality. If we read *Enūma eliš* purely as a myth, we may be tempted to dismiss it as unworthy of serious attention, following Hegel's paraphrase of Aristotle, "It is not worth while to treat seriously of those whose philosophy takes a mythical form."<sup>8</sup> Yet,

*Before Philosophy* and many other engagements with Near Eastern writings present a very partial analysis of the materials available. Such an approach would be as if we only consider Hesiod and forget about Thales and other early Greek philosophers. A reading to the end of the *Enūma eliš*, the cosmogonic poem from Babylonia, the ancient culture that will preoccupy the rest of my discussion, reveals a much different system of thought.

Before we consider the rest of the poem, we need to make a short excursus to explain the basic principles of the writing system the author used. The cuneiform script was one of the longest in use in world history, for more than three thousand years, and an unknown number of people, at times from all over the Near East, recorded a multitude of languages with it. It was not alphabetic, but used several hundreds of signs to indicate both entire words and single syllables. Opaque to those unfamiliar with it, the principles are straightforward and easy to learn. My remarks here are commonplace to those who have studied it, but will, I hope, clarify the basics to those who have not.

The cuneiform script was probably invented to render the Sumerian language—specialists debate the issue—and its connection to that language was essential. At first each sign denoted an entire word, regularly with a connection between the visual representation and the item recorded: the outlines of a river for water (Sumerian a), the ox-head for an ox (Sumerian gud), and so on. Through simple logic the pictures of physical objects were used to depict conceptually related verbs and abstract ideas. The foot indicated “to walk” (Sumerian du) and “to stand firm” (Sumerian gin). Homophony between the words for physical and nonphysical items allowed for the depiction of the latter. Sumerian til, “to live,” sounded like ti, “arrow,” so the drawing of a bow and arrow indicated the verb. The dominance of words made up of single syllables in the Sumerian language made it easy to use word-signs (or logograms) as the building blocks of longer words and grammatical chains, where they lost their connection to concepts and represented sound. In the development of syllabic meanings, consonants were more stable than vowels, but b could easily become p, g could become k, and so on. The ability to render syllables was crucial for the adoption of cuneiform to write the Akkadian language, with its multisyllabic words, and at the same time, the connection to this other language added new potential readings to individual signs. With this increased flexibility users of the script could write down texts in any language whatever its linguistic background: Semitic Akkadian, Indo-European Hittite, and a

mixture of others without clear cognates, such as Sumerian, Hurrian, and Elamite. Throughout its history, scholars of the cuneiform script expanded the possible readings and meanings of signs, as we will see in detail in the next chapters.

A student of cuneiform writing is at first thrown off by a number of characteristics that were essential to the script's flexibility. They are rooted in the bilingualism that was essential to Babylonian literate culture, which treated Sumerian and Akkadian as parallel languages that worked in harmony, a topic I will address in more detail in the next section. Although Sumerian and Akkadian were linguistically very distinct, the Babylonians considered the languages to be inherently tied together and even to be interchangeable. Words in either language could substitute for one another, and, as is true for all translations, various Akkadian equivalents existed for every Sumerian word, and vice versa. Moreover, because the readings of signs as syllables derived from their connections to different Sumerian and Akkadian words, they had multiple phonetic renderings. A single sign could be read as *du*, *de*, *gin*, *kin*, *gub*, *ra*, *re*, or *tum*. Conversely, the same syllable or word could be written with various signs (modern scholars assign them numbers, e.g., *du*, *du*<sub>2</sub>, *du*<sub>3</sub>, etc.). Thus there existed a large variety of potential readings and interpretations of every word and cuneiform sign. While all this seems confusing on the level of the individual signs, when they were read in a sequence the correct reading was obvious to anyone who knew the language, certainly when practical writing was involved. The multiplicity also allowed for intricate explanations of the various options, however, and this is what the author of the *Enūma eliš* used in order to give additional meaning to the text.

When the poet reached the point where Marduk had completed his work and the other gods made him king, he (although women belonged to the literate elites of Babylonia, the chances that a woman wrote the *Enūma eliš* are very small<sup>9</sup>) had written some 900 verses, which in the standard version of the first millennium filled most of six cuneiform tablets. He did not end hastily, however, but devoted another 200 lines to a passage in which the gods recite fifty names of Marduk, explaining what each one means. These present a work of explanatory philology so complex that later Mesopotamian commentators provided clarifications in order to show how the analyses came about. While the later scholars did not necessarily disclose the original author's intent, they shared with him the same approach to reading the cuneiform signs and establishing what they reveal about reality. Most modern scholars paid

little attention to the passage—they called it a solemn recitation of names—until Jean Bottéro unlocked its structure and showed its importance in 1977.<sup>10</sup> One example suffices to make the point. Marduk’s thirty-sixth name is

LUGALABDUBUR

The king who thwarted the maneuvers of Tiamat  
uprooted her weapons  
whose support was firm in front and rear.<sup>11</sup>

In order to interpret the name <sup>d</sup>LUGAL.AB<sub>2</sub>.DU<sub>10</sub>.BUR<sub>3</sub> as explained in the subsequent three verses, the author established multiple equivalences for each of the five signs used to write it, as the ancient commentary text explains. He relied on the basic characteristics of cuneiform writing I just explained, and used them to the fullest extent possible. The information the later commentary provides allows us to interpret the hermeneutic procedures in the passage just quoted as follows:

LUGAL = *šarru*, a common translation from Sumerian into Akkadian of the word “king.”

BUR<sub>3</sub> is equated to BIR<sub>2</sub>, (which is easy because of the secondary character of vowels). Sumerian BIR<sub>2</sub> can be translated in Akkadian as *sapāhu*, “to scatter, thwart.”

DU<sub>10</sub> is equated to its homophone DU<sub>3</sub>, which means “to build.” An Akkadian noun derived from that verb is *epšētu*, that is, “action, maneuvers.”

AB<sub>2</sub> is equated to its homophone AB, which is taken as the abbreviation of the Sumerian word A.AB.BA, whose Akkadian translation is *tāmtu*, “sea.” By extension it indicates the goddess of the sea, Tiamat.

BUR<sub>3</sub> is taken to be the same as its component BU, which has the Akkadian equivalent *nasāhu*, “to uproot.”

DU<sub>10</sub> is equated again to DU<sub>3</sub>, a cuneiform sign that can also be read KAK, the first syllable of the Akkadian word *kakku*, “weapon.”

LU<sub>2</sub>, the first part of LUGAL, is equated to the Akkadian relative pronoun, *ša*, “whose.”

DINGIR, the determinative sign at the start of the entire name used to indicate that a divine name is following (rendered <sup>d</sup> in the transliteration above), is equated with Akkadian *ša rēši*, “in front.”

At this point the commentary is damaged and its explanation of the final equivalences is no longer preserved, but we know the system well enough to restore at least some of it with confidence. The concluding two elements of the name DU<sub>10</sub>.BUR<sub>3</sub> render the Sumerian word DUBUR, which means “foundation, support,” and perhaps the sign DU<sub>10</sub> is to be equated with DU, which means “to be firm” when read GIN.

The five signs of the name <sup>d</sup>LUGAL.AB<sub>2</sub>.DU<sub>10</sub>.BUR<sub>3</sub> thus make up the sentence “The king (LUGAL) who thwarted (BUR<sub>3</sub>) the maneuvers (DU<sub>10</sub>) of Tiamat (AB<sub>2</sub>), uprooted (BUR<sub>3</sub>) her weapons (DU<sub>10</sub>), whose (LUGAL) support (DU<sub>10</sub>.BUR<sub>3</sub>) was firm (DU<sub>10</sub>?) in front (<sup>d</sup>) and rear.”

The author of *Enūma eliš* and its ancient commentators were not alone in using such hermeneutic techniques to expose the meaning of a name or a term. All ancient Babylonian scholars were aware of the underlying principles and displayed remarkable skill and inventiveness in their application. These were not word games, but analyses that aimed to reveal truth. Babylonian scholars grasped reality through its written form. Their readings were thus exercises in epistemology. Using the same procedures of name analysis, Marduk was connected to agriculture, wisdom, warfare, and other areas of life—every aspect of civilization came into being at the time of creation through this naming process. The final two hundred lines of the poem were not an afterthought or a mere liturgical recitation of a god’s attributes through abstruse names. They presented the culmination of creation: everything was made according to a divine plan. That plan may not have been immediately apparent, but the poem supplied the system of analysis, the key to understanding the universe. The *Enūma eliš* was thus not simply a cosmogony; it provided a cosmology.

The ancient Babylonians certainly were not humanists but deeply committed to a theocentric view of the world. Yet, they believed that humans could have a firm knowledge of reality as the gods had created it and continued to direct it, because at the time of creation the gods had provided the tools for understanding, as the *Enūma eliš* shows. Creation in that myth was a work of organization: Marduk did not fashion the universe *ex nihilo*. Rather, he created by putting order into the chaos of Tiamat’s bodily parts. And just as he ordered the physical world, he organized knowledge and structured it through writing: the cuneiform signs that made up the names of Marduk were only meaningful because they were part of a methodical system with proper readings

and equivalences. The system was intricate, and in order to understand even a single name or a word the reader had to know the rules of interpretation in full. But access to knowledge existed, because Marduk had provided it.

The Babylonian theory of knowledge was to an extent empirical—observation was crucial. It was also fundamentally rooted in a rationality that depended on informed reading. Reality had to be read and interpreted as if it were a text. Just like Descartes, the Babylonians knew that senses can deceive and that observation alone is not enough for knowledge. They had a method of finding truth, and if they had any doubt about their own existence it was removed by the knowledge that they could read to understand. “I read, therefore I am” could be seen as the first principle of Babylonian epistemology.

One conclusion is obvious: Access to knowledge was very restricted because literacy was a rare skill, certainly at the level required for the kind of hermeneutical analysis the author of the *Enūma eliš* displayed. The rate of literacy in Babylonia is still a matter of debate, but even if businessmen and accountants had the ability to communicate in writing with a modest understanding of cuneiform as scholars now argue with good reason, they could not figure out these complex scholarly equivalences by themselves. There are levels of literacy.<sup>12</sup> Philosophy everywhere is an elite enterprise, not necessarily because most people lacked ability, but because they lacked training. In the several of the following chapters I will address Babylonian scribal education from a number of perspectives. One of its fundamentals was a thorough knowledge of the polysemy of cuneiform signs both at the level of their reading and their meaning. The science of reading was the basis for all understanding and was thus the foundation of Babylonian philosophy. Naturally, then, this philosophy could only survive in a culture where the Babylonian writing system was known.

So let us return to the relationship between Babylonian and Greek philosophies for a moment. It is clear that the Greeks *could not* adopt the Babylonian methods of philosophy because they did not adopt their methods of reading. They were indeed able to absorb details of Babylonian cosmogony, probably with the Anatolian Hittites and others as intermediaries who reformulated certain elements—the processes of transmission are complex and much debated—because those were matters of contents. When Hesiod recounted the generational struggles of the gods, his tales of parricide and infanticide easily bring those of the ancient Near East to mind. But Hesiod did not write a cosmology. The

subject of cosmology in Greek antiquity is too multifaceted to be addressed here, but a brief look at one expression of it shows how much it differed from the Babylonian approach. It is not important to me here whether or not its views were widely shared; my interest is in comparing the principles behind two cosmologies. In his *Timaeus* Plato treated creation at great length and provided a detailed explanation of the structure of the universe. In some ways the work reads very much like the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*, in other ways it is radically different, although ironically perhaps it relies on a very Babylonian scholarly discipline, mathematics. Plato's creator was the demiurge, the divine craftsman who brought order into primeval chaos, just as the Babylonian Marduk did in the *Enūma eliš*. Compare, for example, the Babylonian passage I quoted before to Plato's description of the origins of time:

In order that time might be created, the sun and the moon and five other heavenly bodies—the so-called planets—were created to determine and preserve the numbers of time.<sup>13</sup>

The demiurge's building blocks were the four elements, fire, water, air, and earth, each a perfect polyhedron made up of identical faces, and he put them together as a mathematician using the best possible combinations. Thus everything could be described and explained through proportions, number sequences, and intervals. We all know about the Greek debt to Babylonian mathematics, so Plato may have been guided here by Near Eastern concepts.

But Plato's explanation of the nature of things was essentially unlike the Babylonian one we just discussed: writing plays no role in it at all. In fact, the *Timaeus* starts with Critias's story of how an Egyptian priest chided Solon because the Greeks had no ancient written accounts (23a–b). Plato could not suggest that we analyze the universe as a written text, because his understanding of writing was fundamentally different from the Babylonian one. To him mathematical models determined the structure of the universe; it was those that provided insights. Another Socratic dialogue addressed the idea of writing as a dead end in the search for truth. In his deconstruction of theories of knowledge, *Theaetetus*, a brief passage on writing appears. Socrates claims that while syllables have meaning, our knowledge about them does not improve through the analysis of the individual letters, because those are not objects of reason.<sup>14</sup> The Babylonians saw matters otherwise: each component of the written word contained meaning. Naturally the smallest ele-

ment was not the individual letter—such a concept did not exist in their writing—but every building block of the word could be analyzed and interpreted in order to grasp its full meaning. The fundamental difference between Greece and Babylon should not lead to the conclusion that the Babylonian approach was not philosophical or systematic. On the contrary, it was a rigorously disciplined, scientific search for truth.

Before addressing the Babylonian system in detail, which will take up the better part of this book, I want to introduce some elements that are crucial for our understanding of ancient Mesopotamia's intellectual history, and not always known to scholars outside the field of Assyriology that deals with the original source materials. The written remains from the cuneiform tradition are vast in number—a recently published estimate speaks of more than one million<sup>15</sup>—and cover numerous areas of human thought. They are rooted in a set of cultural practices that radically inform the way they express ideas, and that differ from those of other cultures, ancient and modern. I will address the following elements here: the essential Sumero-Akkadian bilingualism of Babylonian literate culture and its cosmopolitanism, the interface between the written and the oral, the author function, and the continuity of engagement with a common discourse through the more than three millennia of the cuneiform tradition. An understanding of my views on these will explain some of the approaches I take later in this work.

## Twin-Tongued Babylonia

As the analysis of Marduk's names showed, the foundations of the Babylonian hermeneutic system relied on the interplay between the Sumerian and Akkadian languages. Linguistically the two were very different, the first an agglutinative language without known cognates in which lexical and grammatical change results from the merger of various fixed elements, the second a Semitic language, related to many others known, that varies the meaning of core roots through vowel change, the inclusion of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, and other modifications. As these two languages were used in the same communities perhaps from prehistory on, they borrowed some of each other's vocabulary, and the Sumerian sentence structure influenced the Akkadian one, but the two remained clearly distinct. Still, the ancient Babylonians saw them as parallel languages that were interchangeable. In Akkadian they called them *lišān mithurti*, literally “languages of the meeting each other.” Modern scholars disagree on whether this means they

were in harmony or in opposition,<sup>16</sup> but all who work on this material agree that everything that was expressed in one language conceivably could be expressed in the other, however difficult the switch may have been. A first-millennium literary vignette about school life, bilingual itself, asks the student whether he knows the Akkadian equivalent, literally “mirror,” of the Sumerian language.<sup>17</sup> And one can say that in essence writings in Babylonia always had the two languages in mind. Even when a text was fully written in Sumerian, it could be read in Akkadian as well.

Explicit bilingualism with texts rendered in both languages on the same object started in the mid-third millennium when kings from northern Babylonian Akkad issued royal inscriptions in parallel columns, Sumerian on the left, Akkadian on the right. Kings of Babylon revived the practice in the eighteenth century BC either using the same format or broadcasting corresponding texts on separate objects. At the same time a program of creating bilingual works took place, probably triggered by the disappearance of Sumerian as a spoken language. The bilingual compositions thus elaborated included lexical texts and works of literature. We will look at lexical material in more detail in chapter 2; what happened to literature is complex and little studied, and I will make some brief remarks about it here.

After the Babylonian scribes had experimented with some other formats, they settled on a standard practice in which each Sumerian verse was immediately followed by its Akkadian parallel. We call the format interlinear translation. The basis for the selection of materials for such treatment baffles us. Some Sumerian compositions preserved in numerous manuscripts, such as many of the epics, were disregarded, while other texts that seem marginal to us lived on in bilingual form. Passages in Sumerian literary works inspired parts of Akkadian tales—stories about the heroes Gilgamesh and Adapa<sup>18</sup>—but no Sumerian texts were fully translated into Akkadian to survive as independent compositions in that language. The only true exception to this rule appears in the well-known *Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. In its first-millennium version the epic contains an Akkadian translation of the story we call *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, known from a substantial number of Sumerian manuscripts of the early second millennium. Only the last 172 lines of this approximately 300-line-long poem were turned into Akkadian, however, and added as an appendix to the Babylonian text, where it had a history as an Akkadian composition detached from its Sumerian original.<sup>19</sup> Some monolingual Akkadian texts are paraphrases

of Sumerian poems—for example, *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld* is an awkward abbreviation of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, so shortened that it is hard to understand on its own. But otherwise, if a Sumerian text was translated into Akkadian it only survived in a bilingual context.

It is clear that already in the eighteenth century bilingual texts were not just translations of existing Sumerian texts into Akkadian. A substantial part of literate creativity was bilingual in essence. Our use of the term “translation” suggests that all texts were originally composed in one language and then converted into the other. Probably that was not always the case: many authors wrote their texts in both languages simultaneously and considered the bilingualism to be essential. As the poet of the Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* wrote, the country was “twin-tongued.”<sup>20</sup> This was, of course, a literate bilingualism of the educated classes; it was an artifice of writing. In Babylonia's multilingual society the literati may have spoken several languages other than Sumerian or Akkadian at home, and the majority of the population could not comprehend the languages they used in their writing. It is not the case, as is frequently claimed in modern studies, that Akkadian reflected the vernacular, while Sumerian was the dead language of culture; both versions were purely erudite. There are many parallels to this situation in the later history of the region. Intellectual life in the Middle East has often been bilingual: Aramaic-Greek, Arabic-Persian, and Turkish-Arabic. While the origins of these various multilingual cultures differed, as did the ways in which they were articulated, they all show how literate creativity can thrive within linguistic heterogeneity.

### A Babylonian Cosmopolis

The multilingual context of Babylonian culture becomes even more salient when we consider that for long periods in its history it was not restricted to one clearly defined region. My use of the term “Babylonian” requires clarification. It is not restricted by the parameters of modern scholarly practices, which are actually remarkably fluid and imprecise. Is it a language or dialect, a culture, a region, a political formation? Various usages are common, sometimes in the same publication. In current scholarship, something is considered Babylonian because it derives from the southern region of Mesopotamia, that is, the area between modern-day Baghdad and the Persian Gulf, or, when writ-

ten, because it is in the dialect of Akkadian mostly attested there, or because it originated under political regimes that unified the region, and so on. I use “Babylonian” as a purely textual form of classification. It includes, but is not limited to, the bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian literate culture produced by people with a multitude of linguistic backgrounds in the southern part of Mesopotamia for the entire duration of the existence of cuneiform script. Thus it starts prior to any political construct one can call Babylonian and before the dominance of writings in the so-called Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. Not only was this culture a product of very heterogeneous societies residing in southern Mesopotamia, but it was also what I call cosmopolitan, borrowing a term used for the study of later periods of world history.<sup>21</sup> Throughout preclassical history, writings of all genres that were Babylonian in character and had a bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian background appeared outside that region. From the mid-third to the mid-first millennium a very special and close cultural relationship existed between Babylonia and Assyria to its immediate north, whose inhabitants used related yet distinct dialects of the Akkadian language in their day-to-day writings, but shared a common idiom for works of literature and royal glorification. The connections could be so close that we habitually speak of ancient Mesopotamian culture, but the distinctions between Babylonia and Assyria are often clear enough that we should be more specific. This cultural entity at many moments, especially in the third and second millennia, had a radical impact on the literate cultures of the surrounding areas, from central Anatolia to western Iran and sometimes even into Egypt. Various works of literature, lexical lists, omen texts, and other writings appeared in exact copies, excerpts and paraphrases, with or without translations, and in other formats, in the libraries of Hittites, Elamites, Syrians, and others, all people speaking and often writing multiple other languages. At times the preserved sources from these regions are far richer than those from Babylonia proper and so they are essential for our understanding of literary history. One such period was the second half of the second millennium. It was a time of crucial importance for the development of all Babylonian scholarship and literature. Yet, we have almost no sources from Babylonia then, and instead we have to turn to evidence from several cities in Anatolia and Syria to study what materials were written and in what form.

Assyriological scholarship sees this phenomenon purely in terms of a core-periphery model, in which the Babylonians were the creative minds whose works traveled abroad, to be copied and imitated with

various levels of success. I suggest we see it as an example of a cosmopolitan culture, one that was not based on an imperial enterprise like the Latin cosmopolis, or on a universalist religion like the Arabic-Islamic one. Perhaps the Sanskrit cosmopolis of the first millennium AD, which had no political or religious center, was the closest in nature, although there are clear differences with the Babylonian case as well. This aspect of ancient Near Eastern cultural history requires much more study and historicization, but the reader ought to be warned that in my surveys of lexical, divinatory, and legal writings the geographical purview will at times reach far beyond the area of Babylonia, as without doing so we cannot grasp what happened with those texts. This, of course, also has an impact on the epistemological paradigm I will study: it was not a narrow regional one but one known throughout the ancient Near East.

### The Written and the Oral

Because it is located at the dawn of history, many scholars regard ancient Mesopotamian culture as steeped in an oral tradition, with writing emerging slowly as a primary means of expression. Although written texts existed from the late fourth millennium on, their scope was restricted to administration and lexicography, and only gradually other concerns acquired written expression as well: poetry, accounts of royal activity, laws, and so on. It is commonsense to these scholars that the oral form preceded the written one, the second merely recording the first. The question of orality and literacy in ancient cultures is a thorny one—E. J. Brill publishes an ongoing series devoted to the issue: *Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, recently renamed *in the Ancient World*, and in its multiple volumes scholars disagree forcefully about the relative importance of oral and written traditions in Classical Antiquity. Few scholars of ancient Mesopotamia have addressed the question explicitly, but those who have done so have concluded, against standard opinion, that the oral tradition did not have primacy over the written one. Naturally poetry takes a foremost position in such discussions, which are often influenced by the ongoing debate about the creation of the Homeric epics in archaic Greece. The elements for oral creativity adduced by Homeric scholars who work in the vein of Parry and Lord—metric patterns and formulaic language—cannot be attested in Sumerian poetry or are not definitive indications of an oral background.<sup>22</sup> Of course, it is not a question of whether all writings were either render-

ings of oral formulations or conceived in written form; some compositions could easily have been originally oral, while it is hard to imagine that others, such as the poems in which the initial and sometimes also the final signs of each verse spell out sentences vertically,<sup>23</sup> were not thought up by a writer. Furthermore, it is important to remember that oral practices differ in literate and nonliterate societies, as Jack Goody has shown in detail, and even in early Islamic thought the reputed authority of oral transmission cannot be considered as separate from the written tradition.<sup>24</sup> Since the argument in this book depends so much on the written form of expression, I will adduce here evidence of how the ancient Mesopotamians honored the written text as authoritative—this is not to say that there was no oral tradition as well nor that everything preserved was conceived as a written text, but to demonstrate that writing was central in the formulation of Mesopotamian thought.

To state the obvious: we only know what ancient Mesopotamians recorded in writing; there could have been a parallel oral tradition that is totally lost to us. But the Mesopotamians repeatedly stressed the value of the written source over the oral. In the subscript of a late-second-millennium manuscript of divine hymns, for example, the scribe apologized for not having access to a written source: “Written on the basis of the mouth of a scholar. I did not see an ancient copy.”<sup>25</sup> Oral recollection of such hymns existed, but it was not considered as trustworthy as written evidence. The text had greater authority because of its antiquity, which theoretically could go back to primordial times. Although very late in Babylonian history, a passage from the Hellenistic historian Berossos eloquently reflects this idea. Recounting the Flood story, this third-century BC author wrote:

Kronos (i.e., Babylonian god Ea) stood over him Xisouthros (i.e., Sumerian Ziusudra and Babylonian Utnapishtim) in his sleep and said that on the fifteenth of the month of Daisios mankind would be destroyed by a flood. He thus ordered him to bury the beginnings and middles and ends of all writings and hide them in the city of the Sun, Sippar. And after building a ship he was to embark on it with his kin and close friends.

And after the flood receded, Berossos went on to say:

So, when they went to Babylon, they dug up the writings from Sippar.<sup>26</sup>

A Babylonian version of the tale appeared in the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which starts off with praising the eponymous hero for bringing back wisdom from before the flood as well as writing down his adventures.<sup>27</sup> It was the written record that survived, not the oral one.

Scribes were proud of their skills. A late Babylonian bilingual text praised their art for being the inspiration both of the eloquent speaker and of the erudite scholar.<sup>28</sup> We know that “singers” who recited hymns and various other texts to the accompaniment of musical instruments were common in courts and cult centers, but we need not envision them as bards who sustained an oral tradition. The residence of a “chief singer” at Assur in the first millennium contained a rich library of manuscripts: hymns to gods, kings, and cities, prayers and rituals, as well as myths and epics.<sup>29</sup>

Instruction, too, was a process of writing. Students had to struggle with what one could call a situation of “extreme diglossia”:<sup>30</sup> not only was the Babylonian they wrote distinct from what they spoke, but the basis of the education system was the linguistically entirely different Sumerian no longer current in speech. They practiced rote learning, repeatedly writing down the same excerpts. Many scholars argue that they did so following the teacher’s oral recitation, because some of the errors in their work show that they misheard him. Others assert that the students’ task was to memorize passages from lexical and literary texts and reproduce them in writing, which explains why the early parts of compositions are much better represented in their work than later ones—naturally they memorized those first—and why lapses of memory appear.<sup>31</sup> But at the same time, we have ample evidence of students copying out the master’s written example. There existed a type of school tablet that contained the teacher’s model on the left side while the student had to copy it out on the right side. The right side of many such tablets is very thin, if it is preserved at all, as the student’s work was time and again erased by scraping off a layer of clay. Advanced students were sent off to copy inscriptions on standing monuments. At Nippur in the eighteenth century they reproduced on clay tablets what they read on the statues of kings from the twenty-fourth century, and they indicated where on the monuments these inscriptions were located.<sup>32</sup> It seems thus strange to me to assert that all scribal instruction was based on oral teaching and that the spoken version was considered superior to the written one. Written examples were often consulted and reproduced, and the goal of the entire education system was to train writers.

In one of the early second millennium literary dialogues about a student's life, the young man boasts:

If you examine what I write, you will see that I have to spend less than three months more in school. I have already recited and written the Sumerian and Akkadian words of the list called *a-a me-me*. I have written all the lines of the list of people's names called *Inanna-teš* and of the word list called *lu = šu*, even the outdated ones. I can show the signs, their writing, and meaning; that is how I express myself.<sup>33</sup>

There is no evidence at all from Mesopotamia that oral communication was considered superior to writing or that there was an oral tradition independent from the written one. While oral and written transmission existed in parallel, the latter was considered the most authoritative. In a seventh-century letter to the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, an unidentified priest from Nippur wrote:

(Only) [*rites that*] are written down in scripture are our rites. They have been performed by our forefathers, and they meet the needs of the king. (There are) a hundred, (nay,) a thousand (rites) which, as far as I am concerned, would be suitable for the *purification* of the kings, my lords. But, because they are not our rites, they are not recorded in scripture.<sup>34</sup>

Scholarship was thus essentially and by definition based on written sources, which were to be read. The way in which the text was spelled out was visible and could be interpreted according to the principles I illustrated before for the names of Marduk. The scribal art was indeed "father of scholars."<sup>35</sup>

## The Death of the Author?

Who were the scholars, the philosophers whose ideas we will try to investigate here? Modern historians of philosophy essentially study a sequence of thinkers, great men (and some women) whose theories define a moment in time: Aristotle, Kant, Arendt . . . in the European tradition; Avicenna/Ibn Sīnā, Averroes/Ibn Rushd, . . . for medieval Islamic philosophy; Confucius/Kong Fuzi, Mencius/Meng Zi, . . . for ancient China, and so on. When we turn to the ancient Mesopotamian material we are confronted by a blank in this respect: there were no

acknowledged authors, only manuscripts. With very few exceptions this is true for all writings there, apart from letters and records of practical use. This has caused much anxiety among modern scholars. Numerous investigations of Mesopotamian authorship exist, and they all conclude that the few examples where names are attached to written creations are exceptions that confirm the rule.<sup>36</sup> Mesopotamian literary and scholarly writings were anonymous.

What is an author, however? The idea that it is a human who can declare that he or she created a text is very modern; Roland Barthes claimed that this concept is “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology,” something that shackles the text and that should be killed off. Michel Foucault’s essay on the question pointed out how the idea and competence of the author is historically determined and depends on what genre of writing is involved. The author is not an individual identified as are other persons, but a process of interaction with the discourse, which can entail a multiplicity of voices. It makes more sense to talk of the author function, he claims.<sup>37</sup> The Mesopotamians seem to have reached that conclusion many centuries ago. They did recognize human agency as a factor in the production of a text, but authorship was more complex than a single person who stood at the point of origin; it involved transmission and preservation as well. Literary creativity was “an ongoing, contributive exercise,”<sup>38</sup> and implied creators, copyists, and owners. The boundaries between these three groups were fluid.

We get a view of this attitude in a seventh-century academic text known from five fragments found at Nineveh, and published in modern times under the title *The Catalogue of Texts and Authors*.<sup>39</sup> The modern designation portrays it as one of the exceptional records of authorship in the modern sense of the word: it lists the titles of corpora of texts—The Lamentation-priests’ Corpus, for example—or of individual compositions—the series *Sakikkû*, for example—and states that they were “from the mouth of someone” or a similar phrase. The names that follow this phrase show, however, that these attributions had a different meaning from what we find in library catalogues today—one entry claims that a horse dictated the text. Let us look at some passages more closely.

The *Catalogue* starts off with

[The Exorcists’] Corpus; The Lamentation-priests’ Corpus; When Anu and Enlil; [(If) a] Form; Not Completing the Months; Diseased

Sinews; [(If)] the Utterance [of the Mouth]; The King, the Storm (?), whose Aura is Heroic; Fashioned like An. [These are] from the mouth of the god Ea.

The list includes some of the most sophisticated and authoritative scholarly and literary works of the first millennium—I will refer to some of them repeatedly later on—and attributes them to the god of wisdom, Ea. Such an attribution is not really surprising, nor is it unparalleled in world history: there are many well-known cases where texts are said to be from a god's mouth. In another entry, the *Catalogue* refers to the most explicit example of a god dictating a literary work to a human being known to us in the Mesopotamian corpus. It states:

[King of All Habitations, Creator of] the World Regions. [This is what] was revealed to [Kabti-ilani-Marduk, son of Dabibi], and which he spoke.

The quote is lifted directly from the end of a poem of the early first millennium, the *Erra Epic*. There a man called Kabti-ilani-Marduk reported that he heard the text from the god Ishum at night, and that he wrote it down the next morning, not adding or subtracting a single sentence. Kabti-ilani-Marduk reveals himself as the faithful transmitter of the text.<sup>40</sup>

Other so-called authors in the *Catalogue* are presented as more active, however. Most famous today is Sîn-lēqe-unninni, who appears in this entry:

The series of Gilgamesh is from the mouth of Sîn-lēqe-unninni, the [ ]

That man was indeed closely associated with the *Gilgamesh Epic* in the first millennium, but we know that he did not compose the poem. We can reconstruct that epic's literary history, as I will discuss later, and it is clear that its original composition preceded its alleged author by centuries. At most we can say that sometime in the late second millennium Sîn-lēqe-unninni produced an edition of it that was much respected later on. When we look at appearances elsewhere of the names of Sîn-lēqe-unninni, Kabti-ilani-Marduk, and others in the *Catalogue* we see how they were not authors in the modern sense of the term, yet crucial for the author function, that is, the interaction with the discourse. For this information we need to turn to a scribal practice we call the colophon.

## Scribes and Collectors

Especially in the first millennium, literary and scholarly cuneiform tablets ended with brief passages—we call them colophons—in which the scribes provided information that was liminal to the text's contents. Colophons were both within and outside the manuscript. When the tablet was part of a multi-tablet series, the colophon registered its number and sometimes quoted the first line of the subsequent tablet. Important for our purposes here is that colophons regularly named a manuscript's owner and its scribe. The distinction between the two was vague. When the colophon merely asserted "tablet of," it seems this meant that scribe and owner were the same person; occasionally it said so explicitly: "He wrote it himself." When two names were mentioned, the scribe frequently was the owner's son.<sup>41</sup>

In many colophons scribes and owners traced their lineage, not only through their father's name but also through what we call an ancestral name. While this information allows us to reconstruct the histories of scribal families across generations and the traditional boundaries of political history, the ancestral names also tell us much about the self-perception of the scribes. Ancestral names were not limited to scribes and tablet owners but common throughout urban society in later first millennium Babylonia. Of the seventy-seven ancestral names attested in the city Uruk in the sixth century, fifty-six were used for one type of professional only, so these names created artificial lineages to express a sense of professional identity.<sup>42</sup> People selected eponymous ancestors who were connected to their professions. Those seem mostly to have been men who had lived in the late second millennium, and whose names had survived through tradition. The choice of the names was thus important, as they were a mark of distinction. And not surprisingly, those of scribes and tablet owners are the names that appear in the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* as well: Dabibi as the father of Kabtilani-Marduk, Sîn-lēqe-unninni, Ashgandu, Shumu-libshi, and others.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly the *Catalogue* includes several names not attested as scribal ancestors, and the ancestral names include some not found in the *Catalogue*, but it is clear that the two sources share a common intellectual background.

According to the colophons, who possessed the manuscripts was as important as who wrote them. In Near Eastern antiquity both institutions and individuals owned tablet collections—we can call them libraries. The most famous library from ancient Mesopotamia is the one King

Assurbanipal of Assyria (ruled 668–627 BC) sponsored, a gigantic collection that was kept in the royal citadel at Nineveh, called Kuyunjik in modern times. The library, discovered at the dawn of European exploration of Mesopotamia, is massive in size, and interpreting it is not easy. In essence, no archaeological context exists for the many tablets that were scooped up *en masse* and shipped to the British Museum in London, where they now form the Kuyunjik Collection. It is certain that items of various palaces, temples, and private residences in the citadel and elsewhere in Nineveh (and possibly from other sites as well) were mixed up together during that transfer.<sup>44</sup> So we cannot say that the Kuyunjik Collection is the library of Assurbanipal, but that does not mean no such library existed. Colophons show that Assurbanipal considered himself to be the owner of a coherent body of texts. On a substantial number of tablets appears an *ex libris* that was so often repeated that some scribes used molds to stamp it onto the clay, while others wrote it in ink: “palace of Assurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria.”

It is also clear that Assurbanipal wanted to present himself as the scribe of many of the manuscripts, removing the distinction between owner and scribe. One colophon states, for example: “I am Assurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria, to whom the gods Nabû and Tashmetu gave great wisdom and who has bright eyes. I wrote the cream of the scribal art.” Modern scholars used to object that Assurbanipal did not have the skills needed to write tablets with this level of complication, but we know now that as a young man he had an advanced scribal training under a leading court scholar. So he could have written part of the library himself, although certainly not the whole.<sup>45</sup>

Assurbanipal did not create his library from scratch, but followed in the footsteps of his predecessors. The core was built by combining older collections, including private ones of Assyrian scholars, such as Nabû-zuqup-kēna, who had worked in Kalhu between 718 and 684.<sup>46</sup> The king intensified collecting efforts, however, and it looks like his goal was to bring together as many items of Mesopotamian literature and scholarship as possible. He, and seemingly everyone around him, had no interest at all in foreign works, but wanted anything written in Babylonia. A small group of letters, preserved from Babylonian copies made perhaps hundreds of years after the fall of Assyria, attests to his methods. One reports the demand of an unnamed king, probably Assurbanipal but perhaps his father Esarhaddon, to his representative in the Babylonian city Borsippa:

The day you read this tablet, take in your company Šumāy son of Šum-ukīn, his brother Bēl-ētir, Aplāy son of Arkāt-ilī, and the scholars of Borsippa whom you know, and collect whatever tablets are in their houses and whatever tablets are kept in Ezida (the temple of Nabû in Borsippa). Search out for me (the letter gives a long list of works used by exorcists), and any texts that might be needed in the palace, as many as there are, also rare tablets that are known to you but do not exist in Assyria, and send them to me.

A reply to a similar request from Assurbanipal is also preserved:

To Assurbanipal, great king, . . . The dutiful Borsippans will send back to the king their lord the instruction that he wrote as follows, “Write out all the scribal learning in the property of Nabû and send it to me. Complete the instruction!” Maybe the king says to himself, we (are ones) who, like the citizens of Babylon, will shirk (it) by (using) confusing language. Now, we shall not shirk the king’s command. We shall strain and toil day and night to complete the instruction for our lord the king. We shall write boards of sissoo-wood, we shall respond immediately. And regarding the board in Sumerian, the glossary about which you sent word, there is none but that in the Esagil (Marduk’s temple in Babylon). Let enquiries now be made before our lord the king. [You should] send word to the citizens of Babylon.<sup>47</sup>

Acquisition records document that some 2000 clay tablets and some 300 writing boards—wooden polyptychs covered with a wax layer into which the cuneiform text was scratched—were added to the library in 647. It is impossible to calculate how large Assurbanipal’s library was. Combined with administrative documents, letters, and reports, the number of Kuyunjik texts in the British Museum today is around 26,000 tablets and fragments, which include multiple copies of some compositions. Published estimates have ranged from 5000 literary and scholarly works to 1500, but the latter number seems too low now that we know of the acquisitions in the year 647.<sup>48</sup>

There existed a large number of noninstitutional libraries throughout ancient Near Eastern history as well, regularly found in private residences during excavations all over the region from the Zagros Mountains to the Mediterranean coast. Especially in the first millennium, colophons allow us to reconstruct their contents with great certainty, and they show how several generations of the same families maintained and expanded the collections, oftentimes writing new manuscripts them-

selves. The range of interests and scholarly competence these libraries display can be amazingly broad. Take, for example, Nabû-zuqup-kēna, a man merely identified as scribe in the colophons but clearly a very high-ranking one. He owned manuscripts dealing with astrology and astronomy, including many tablets of the massive omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, which had been copied over a period of seventeen years. His library also held series of terrestrial omens, oracle texts, the *Ritual of the Diviner*, prayers, incantations, and the final tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. He was a true polymath.<sup>49</sup>

We can thus say that to the Mesopotamians not one but three people fulfilled the author function. The original creator, whom in modern times would be considered the author, was given little prominence and was often considered to be a figure of the distant past. The manuscript owner was responsible for bringing texts together and the choice involved gave agency: Assurbanipal aimed at collecting everything written in Babylonia, while Nabû-zuqup-kēna made a selection among respected works. And the scribe, who was oftentimes the owner, was the transmitter. Here a strange situation existed: the scribe could do much more than faithfully copy of the text, although the colophon asserted that this was the sole aim.

### The Fluidity of the Text

The colophons present us with something of a paradox: while they state that the scribe made a copy that was “faithful to the original and collated,”<sup>50</sup> we know from preserved manuscripts that this was untrue. The attitude reminds us of the first-century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who claimed he copied out the words of Moses “without adding any thing to what is therein contained, or taking away any thing therefrom” (*Jewish Antiquities* 1, 17), while it is obvious that he gave a different version from the one preserved in the Hebrew Bible. The contents and organization of literary and scholarly works in ancient Mesopotamia was never fixed and always open to change, because the author function was not restricted to the first composer of a text. Alterations were common and considered to be necessary. In a letter to King Esarhaddon, three Assyrian scribes wrote:

The series should be revised. Let the king command: two “long” tablets containing the explanations of antiquated words should be removed, and two tablets of the extispicy series, *bārûtu*, should be put (instead).<sup>51</sup>

Texts had millennia-long histories, with constant redaction that was the work of many people. Changes could have very practical motives: scribes of Assurbanipal added omens to the extispicy series to present the king as just and glorious, inserting his name in them. Even the authoritative astronomical series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, a massive collection of celestial omens to which Assyrians scholars constantly referred, circulated in parallel editions with varying details. Regional peculiarities existed, and even writers who lived outside the Assyro-Babylonian heartland of cuneiform culture felt free to introduce changes. At times the material became so disorganized and chaotic that someone had to put it in order. According to a first-millennium catalogue of medical texts, for example, the eleventh-century scholar Esagil-kīn-apli fully reorganized that material, producing a new edition.<sup>52</sup> His editorial work received explicit credit, but that was not often the case.

Although the term “canonical” was discredited long ago, Assyriologists continue to cite “canonical” versions of texts, often admitting they do so *faute de mieux*. Yet, canonicity brings to mind officially or divinely endorsed editions of writings, and those did not exist in ancient Mesopotamia. References in Assyrian scholarly letters distinguish between two types of textual transmission using the Akkadian terms *iškaru* and *aḫû*, which translate literally as “series” and “extraneous.” The materials so designated paralleled each other in character, although they differed in contents and were preserved side by side in some libraries. It does not seem that one was considered superior to the other. Most likely individual communities—say, scholars from a specific city or institution—preferred one version over the other. One group’s “series” could be another’s “extraneous” material and vice versa. The popularity of a text may have determined how faithfully it was reproduced. Scribes probably attempted to be more faithful to older originals when working with a text that was considered central to the corpus and that was copied frequently than when they worked with a marginal one. Still, no text was considered unalterable, and individual scribes could “improve” it. Thus they had authorial powers if they stayed within the accepted traditions.<sup>53</sup>

## Intertextual Reading

Creators, scribes, and owners all contributed to the author function for a Mesopotamian text; but the texts were never completed, the authorial work never finished. We are in the unusual situation that for many compositions multiple versions are known to us, and that a textual rec-

ord is available that documents its own genealogy through a continuous diachronic corpus. The contrast with other traditions is stark. Homeric and biblical scholars have long been engaged in drawn-out arguments about the prehistories of the texts they study. What were the sources, when were they dated, and what did they contain? Were there oral antecedents to Homer's great epics? What sources inspired the multiple traditions that we can trace in the biblical text as we know it today? Compare these uncertainties to the history of the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Popular modern translations render the best known and most completely preserved version reconstructed from multiple manuscripts that were excavated in the ruins of Nineveh, penned down in the mid-seventh century on twelve multicolumn tablets. But we also know previous versions of many passages of this poem—as we do not of the *Iliad* or the book of Genesis—through numerous manuscripts. We know that some parts of the *Epic* had ancestors in the Sumerian language, written in the early second millennium. We know that the famous Flood story had developed as a separate composition in the second millennium before it became part of the *Epic*. Our knowledge is incomplete, but it is greater than in other fields of ancient literature, and it continues to grow as new manuscripts crop up. Even today we have a reliable pedigree of the seventh-century text of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and the evolution did not end at that time. Although thereafter the text was more fixed than before, Babylonian scribes continued to make changes to it into the late second century BC. The alterations by successive authors were not innocent elaborations, but changed the character and emphasis of the tale and introduced new themes. In the Sumerian antecedents the heroism of the king was a major theme. The earliest Akkadian-language versions dealt with such issues as friendship, death, and power, while later on the wisdom Gilgamesh gained on his travels became the main focus.<sup>54</sup> Similar histories can be reconstructed for many literary and, especially, scholarly texts from Mesopotamia. Modern scholars of this textual material, often trained as biblicists or classicists, used to talk about proto-texts, forerunners, *Vorlage*, and the like, but most of them no longer do so as they realize that each moment in the tradition has equal validity. When we read a text, then, we do so intertextually, acknowledging its connections to its own other manifestations. Babylonian texts invite the discovery of their own genealogy.

Intertextuality (using the term in the broad sense it has acquired in literary criticism) can easily be extended further. Each text contains numerous internal references. This is most explicit in scholarly writ-

ings, which customarily elaborate paradigms according to multiple rules I will discuss in detail in several of the later chapters. When an omen based on the reading of the liver predicts a negative outcome because of a discoloration on the left, its full meaning is only clear when we realize that the same discoloration on the right is propitious. These references readily transgress the boundaries of individual texts and even of what we could call corpora of texts. In omens, what is written in the sky parallels what is written on earth, because at the time of creation Marduk “did the same on earth as what he brought to pass in heaven.”<sup>55</sup> Celestial and terrestrial omens are to be read in tandem. Legal pronouncements found in codes like Hammurabi’s use the same structure as divine verdicts in omens. Literary texts contain passages that resemble those in lexical texts, and vice versa. Both make reference to scholarly descriptive texts. Each text participates in a hypertext in which we can pursue references in ways that suit our purposes. The unity of discourse in Mesopotamian writings was thus never the individual text as attested in a single manuscript; it was the entire diachronic history of a text as well as its interactions with others.<sup>56</sup>

A question that arises is how Babylonian authors knew about their culture’s literary history. The materials they left us are truly massive in number and detail;<sup>57</sup> but a vast period of time was involved, and naturally there is great variation in what has been preserved and discovered for specific periods of Mesopotamian history. Even if we have moments with extensive documentation, dark ages are common, and they are not only the result of our failure to find the written remains, the so-called “accident of recovery.” For long periods scribal activity in Babylonia was minimal—for example, from 1600 to 1400 and 1100 to 800; but there was always someone somewhere who kept the tradition alive—otherwise we cannot explain the continuity of its literate culture.

We can hold original cuneiform tablets written four millennia ago or even earlier in our hands today; their survival into modern times is mostly due to the fact that in antiquity they were discarded or buried in the ruins of the buildings where they were stored. In essence we find the manuscripts that went out of circulation in the distant past, not those that had been carefully preserved. The situation for the copyists in ancient Mesopotamia was very different. Although they occasionally stated that they found their source in debris<sup>58</sup> and they often worked with damaged originals—they noted down when a passage was illegible—they did not routinely rediscover caches of old manuscripts that had been buried for centuries, like we do, and use them as the basis for

their work. Rather, they made copies of materials that were in circulation. To my knowledge no one has ever estimated how long a tablet kept on a shelf indoors would survive, but it seems that this would not have been many decades.<sup>59</sup> When the tablet's clay was baked it was quite indestructible, but most tablets were only sun-dried and thus more fragile. Damage was likely to occur pretty soon, and it seems unlikely that usable century-old clay manuscripts would have been routinely available to scholars.

There existed something of a literary trope claiming that manuscripts were extremely old, but these statements seem more fantastic than real. For example, the Assyrian scholar Ašaredu wrote to his royal master in the seventh century: "Now then I have written and fetched from Babylon an ancient tablet made by King Hammurabi and an inscription from before King Hammurabi."<sup>60</sup> If accurate it would mean that the man had access to a tablet that was more than a thousand years old, and it is much more likely that he associated a manuscript with the by-then legendary King Hammurabi, famed for his wisdom, to give it distinction. A long colophon on a ritual tablet from the Seleucid era presents an entire literary legend about the history of its source:

(This tablet was copied) from tablets which Nabopolassar, king of the Sea Land, carried off as plunder from the city of Uruk; but now Kidin-Anu, a citizen of Uruk, a *mašmašu*-priest of Anu and Antu, a descendant of Ekur-zakir, an *urigallu*-priest of the Resh temple, looked at these tablets in the land of Elam, copied them in the reigns of kings Seleucus and Antiochus, and brought (his copies) back to the city of Uruk.<sup>61</sup>

Again it seems more likely that the scribe fancied that his source was 300 years old and connected to a renowned king, Nabopolassar, the founder of the great Neo-Babylonian Empire, than that such ancient manuscripts had indeed survived. Other writing materials existed besides clay tablets: wooden or ivory boards with a layer of wax into which the cuneiform was scratched, and, in the first millennium, parchment; but these were even more fragile than clay tablets.

Cuneiforms manuscripts were thus ephemeral objects and needed to be copied constantly in order to preserve their content. This means that throughout time scribes had to engage with literary and scholarly materials, irrespective of what happened around them. This is well documented in the exceptionally coherent corpus of writings excavated in the libraries of Hattusas, the second-millennium capital of the Hittites

in Anatolia, where we see a desire to preserve texts through regular recopying of manuscripts, with constant adjustments and updates.<sup>62</sup> Work like this resulted in an amazing “stream of tradition” (as the late A. Leo Oppenheim called it),<sup>63</sup> which was not the slavish reproduction of a corpus with a resistance to change. On the contrary, Mesopotamian intellectuals had an enormous freedom with respect to the materials they read and copied. Writing was creative, not imitative, and all writers were part of an unbroken chain of people working in the same tradition. Political powers not only tolerated this work, they actively sponsored the preservation of scholarship. There was no book burning in ancient Mesopotamia!<sup>64</sup> The Assyrians repeatedly confiscated libraries and manuscripts when they controlled Babylonia, not to destroy them but to take them home and enrich their own collections. In Mesopotamia, a three-thousand-year-long written intellectual history is documented for us, the result of the creative genius of thousands of individuals, each one participating in a grand tradition that mandated certain principles but at the same time allowed for flexibility and personal input.

Ironically, despite our knowledge of hundreds of names of scribes and tablet owners, and of some so-called authors, we have no idea of what exactly they did. They could alter texts, but we do not know to what extent, and can at best venture guesses.<sup>65</sup> The anonymity of scholarship and literary creativity at first may disorient if we aim for a traditional history of thought, but it puts us in a privileged position; we do not have to kill off the author: he or she is already dead. We are forced into a close reading of the text, as the author has disappeared. Social and marital status, professional preoccupation, and the relationship to grand historical events are of no importance. Even if we wanted to, we could not recover them.<sup>66</sup> We cannot yield to the temptation to historicize the text, to reintroduce the author’s gender, race, and class. As modern readers we are in the same situation as the ancient Mesopotamian ones: the text is our only guide, and the challenge we face is to understand it on its own and in relationship with other texts.

It would be quite foolish to attempt a study of all areas of philosophical inquiry detailed in the vast Mesopotamian textual material,<sup>67</sup> so I will focus on one area alone and examine it in three structurally related corpora: epistemology as displayed in writings on language, the future, and law. The corpora employ the same format: they do not state theories but develop examples on the basis of underlying principles. Their reasoning is pointillistic, cumulatively exploring issues case by case. In

the field of language ancient scholars listed Sumerian words and their translations into Akkadian or, less often, other languages, as well as guides to pronunciation and interpretation. For predicting the future, they listed occurrences in heaven and on earth and stated what these foretold. In law, they listed legal and illegal actions and what the outcome in a just world should be. In all corpora they used a mixture of fact and fiction; existing words and words made up, observed phenomena and imaginary ones, possible transactions and hypothetical ones. These corpora of scholarly writings had multiple aims and purposes, but the one they shared was a demonstration of how and what humans know. They disclose what Babylonians thought about reality; they reveal a Babylonian epistemology.



## Notes

---

### CHAPTER 1. AT THE TIME OF CREATION

1. For example, Cooper 2003.
2. Burkert 2008.
3. Walcot 1956 and many others.
4. Lambert (1985) objected on philological grounds to this interpretation proposed by Jacobsen (1976: 168), but it is so suitable for the southern Babylonian environment that I prefer it to his suggestion of Laḥmu and Laḥamu as indeterminate creatures.
5. For an excellent translation of the myth, see Foster 2005: 436–86. The passages quoted here are tablet 5: 1–4 (Foster 2005: 463) and tablet 6: 8 (Foster 2005: 469). They, and all other passages from that book, are quoted by permission of the author.
6. For example, Lambert (2008) does not mention this part of the myth at all, although he gives a detailed paraphrase of the rest of the text, while Dalley (1989: 230) states that the final two tablets are “not essential to the main work.”
7. Frankfort et al. 1949: 12. An earlier version of the book, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1946, used the title *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, omitting the catchy *Before Philosophy*. It also contained a chapter on the Hebrews not reprinted in Penguin’s 1949 edition.
8. Hegel 1995: 88 (based on lectures given in the 1820s).
9. For literacy among women in ancient Mesopotamia, see Lion 2011.
10. Bottéro 1977. Bottéro 1992: 87–102 provides a synopsis for non-Assyriologists; see also the recent summary, Frahm 2011: 114–16.
11. Tablet 7: 91–92, translation from Foster 2005: 481. Bottéro 1977: 9 analyzes this passage.
12. In recent years scholars of ancient Babylonia, especially Wilcke (2000) and Charpin (2010a: 53–65), have started to argue for much higher rates of literacy than was previously imagined, but they do not differentiate between levels of skill, which Harris (1989), for example, discussed for Classical antiquity. Veldhuis (2011) considered such ideas for Mesopotamia, and distinguished between functional, technical, and scholarly literacy. The latter was clearly needed in the type of hermeneutic analysis discussed here. See also Michalowski (2012) for an account of various levels of literacy in Mesopotamia.
13. *Timaeus* 38d, translation from Waterfield 2008: 26.

14. *Theaetetus* 202c–206b, Cornford 2003: 146–54.
15. Maul 2013: 16.
16. See Seminara 2001: 460–66 for a survey.
17. Sjöberg 1975: 142–43.
18. For Gilgamesh, see George 2003: 7–17, for Adapa, Cavigneaux 2014.
19. George 2003: 726–77.
20. Vanstiphout 2004: 65. In an earlier article (1998: 141) he used the more prosaic “bilingual,” also found in Klein 2000: 567–68 and note 26. The only in-depth study of Mesopotamian bilingualism is the short monograph, von Soden 1960. He connected the languages to separate ethnic identities and saw culture clashes in the merger of two traditions. Some scholars today still see distinct Sumerian and Akkadian worldviews or find more specific differences in behavior, but this approach is much contested (see Seminara 2001: 509–19 for a survey). While I disagree with the idea that we can distinguish between Sumerian and Akkadian ethnicities, the issue is irrelevant to me here, as I want to address Babylonian literate culture as a unified bilingual one, irrespective of how that union materialized. Cooper 1993 and Hallo 1996 provide accessible surveys of bilingual writings in ancient Mesopotamia and its periphery. Vanstiphout 1998 describes the essential bilingualism of Mesopotamian writings very pointedly.
21. Van De Mieroop in press A, based on writings by Sheldon Pollock on the Sanskrit cosmopolis, such as 1996 and 2006.
22. Charpin (2010a) asserts the primacy of the oral over the written, in contradiction to his proposal of a high literacy rate in ancient Mesopotamia. Laessøe 1953 studied the importance of oral tradition in Mesopotamia explicitly, but his conclusion that the written was held in much higher regard than the oral seems to have been mostly ignored. I use several of his arguments here. Afanasjeva 1974 uses more of an evolutionary approach and rejects the common assumption that written literature is a late phenomenon in Mesopotamia. Jacobsen 1982 also sees oral poetry as no longer practiced in court circles by the end of the third millennium. Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992 contains several contributions that challenge the oral assumption; see especially those by J. Cooper and P. Michalowski. Foster (2005: 45) points out that there are no indications of an independent oral phase or tradition for Akkadian literature.
23. Foster 2007: 89.
24. I refer here to Goody 1987. For Islamic practices, see Schoeler 2009. Many historical disciplines today seem to reject the idea that written compositions had oral prehistories; see, for Sanskrit South Asia and medieval Europe, Pollock 2006: 440–42.
25. Hunger 1968: 134 no. 486. For other references to “the mouth of a scholar,” see Roth 2010: 114; the expression appears only very rarely outside tablet colophons (Frahm 2011: 45).
26. De Breucker 2014: F4b. In parentheses I provide the Babylonian equivalents for Berossos’s Greek names.
27. Tablet 1: 8–10, George 2003: 539.
28. Sjöberg 1972, Foster 2005: 1023.

29. Ambos & Schmidt-Colinet 2006–8.
30. Goody 1987: 281.
31. Black et al. 2004: xlviii–xlix. Delnero 2012 studies the issue on the basis of scribal errors in the manuscripts and concludes students must have worked from memory. But Scheucher 2012 points out that, in the case of Hattusas at least, we cannot ascertain whether mistakes in school exercises were the result of mishearing or misreading.
32. See Tinney 1998 for tablets containing the master’s original and student copies, and Buccellati 1993 for the copying of monumental inscriptions. Note also Michalowski 2011: 52–53 for arguments against the use of oral dictation to train students.
33. Civil 1985: 71–72. For the lists the student mentions, see chapter 2 here.
34. Reynolds 2003: no. 204. Passages in square brackets are restored by the modern editor, while words in italics indicate uncertain translations. The words in parentheses are added in the English translation to clarify the contents.
35. After Sjöberg 1972: 126.
36. I list only a few studies here: Foster 1991, Michalowski 1996, Glassner 2002, and Charpin 2010a: 179–81.
37. Barthes 1977: 142–48; Foucault 1979.
38. Foster 1991: 32.
39. Lambert 1962. Unfortunately the state of preservation of the text is poor, and many passages are restored (indicated by square brackets in the excerpts I quote).
40. Foster 2005: 910. The first line of the poem is its ancient title. The passage in the *Catalogue* is heavily restored on the basis of the poem, and there is thus circular reasoning in my statement here. The restoration seems reliable, however.
41. See Hunger 1968: 8–11 for the information on owners and scribes in colophons. His no. 101 is an example of an owner who wrote the tablet himself, no. 102 of a son writing for his father.
42. Van De Mieroop 1997: 108–10.
43. Lambert 1957. Beaulieu 2000 shows how people at Uruk claiming descent from Sîn-lēqe-unninni were mostly scribes and lamentation chanters.
44. Reade 1998–2001: 421–27.
45. See Hunger 1968: nos. 317–45 for the colophons of Assurbanipal’s library. Unfortunately it is unclear what colophons appear on what tablets. Those quoted here are nos. 317 and 338. See also Lieberman 1990: 317. Livingstone 2007 discusses Assurbanipal’s scribal training.
46. Most scholars think that Assurbanipal integrated this library into the royal one at Nineveh, but it is also possible that there was a modern mix-up of tablets from Kalhu and Nineveh, which were excavated at the same time (Lieberman 1987: 217).
47. See Frame & George 2005 for a study of these letters. (The parenthetical remarks in the translation are mine to clarify the meaning of the text.) Although Goldstein 2010 argues convincingly that they are Hellenistic reworkings or even creations, there is no doubt that Assurbanipal avidly collected

Babylonian manuscripts for his library. For records of his acquisitions in the year 647, see Parpola 1983.

48. Weidner (1952–53: 198) thinks that there were about 5000 literary and scholarly compositions in Assurbanipal's library, Oppenheim (1977: 13) only 1500, but that number seems too low (Potts 2000: 23).
49. For Nabû-zuqup-kēna's collection, see Lieberman 1987, esp. 204–17 and note 222. For other family libraries, see, for example, Glassner 2002, 2005a, and 2007, Robson 2007, Clancier 2009, Maul 2010, and Rutz 2013.
50. In Akkadian *kīma labīrišu šaṭirma bari*, cf. Hunger 1980–83.
51. Translation from Parpola 1993: no. 177 obv. 15–rev. 5. Parpola (1970–83: vol. II, 99–100) argues that the request involves a change in the teaching curriculum.
52. See chapter 4, 104–7, and Heeßel 2010 for Esagil-kīn-apli's career.
53. For Assurbanipal's extispicy series, see Jeyes 1997. Already in 1957 Lambert had declared the term “canonical” misleading in the study of Mesopotamian writings (Lambert 1957: 9). Important discussions of cuneiform canonicity are Rochberg-Halton 1984, Lieberman 1990, Veldhuis 1998a, and Robson 2011a. Frahm (2011: 317–32) presents a nuanced concept of canonization and suggests that in the late second millennium most Babylonian scholarly and literary texts were so fixed that they became canonical later on, but he does admit that a great number of variants can occur.
54. A comparison between the histories of the biblical text and the *Epic* was the explicit concern of Tigay 1982. We know much more about the *Epic*'s history today; see George 2003: 3–70 and 2007 for surveys. Pongratz-Leisten 2010: 140–42 summarizes the changes in themes.
55. *Enūma eliš* VI 112, translation from Foster 2005: 473.
56. See Pongratz-Leisten 2010 for an exploration of the hypertext in Mesopotamian writings.
57. No recent survey of the various writings of ancient Mesopotamia exists. Although Chiera 1938 is much outdated, it still is an informative and entertaining read. I know of no published estimate of the number of literary and scholarly cuneiform manuscripts preserved from all Near Eastern sites, but they rank in the tens of thousands.
58. Rutz 2011: 296.
59. Tanret 2008a discusses a box of tablets going as far back as five generations found in a priest's house at Sippar. They included economic documents no longer of any practical use and kept as mementos, and unlikely to have been consulted. Very occasionally an administrative record was duplicated to preserve its contents. An example is Richardson 2010a no. 1, which is a copy of an inventory made seventy-four years earlier. The scribe indicated that several entries were no longer legible.

An intriguing case of a tablet that survived for centuries was excavated at Uruk in the library of Iqiša from the fourth century BC (von Weiher 1983 no. 46). It is a commentary text on liver omens, and the colophon states that the tablet was written for Assurbanipal at Nineveh in the mid-seventh century BC, some 300 years earlier (Farber 1988: 35). This is the only As-

syrian tablet found in Babylonia, and when and how it ended up in a private library is a mystery.

60. Translation from Parpola 1993: no. 155 obv. 7–13.
61. Translation from Pritchard 1969: 345. Brinkman 1998–2001: 16 points out the legendary character of this passage.
62. Van den Hout 2008: 212.
63. 1960 and 1977. The recent attack on this concept (Robson 2011a) seems based on a very narrow reading of Oppenheim's ideas.
64. Berossos asserted that Nabonassar (the eighth-century Babylonian king Nabû-naṣir) "collected the records of the kings before him and destroyed them, so that the enumeration of the kings of the Chaldeans started from him" (De Breucker 2014: F16a), but we should not take his words literally. The abundance of sources from kings before Nabû-naṣir contradicts him. Note also that in the Armenian parallel of the passage the text reads: "In collecting the names of the kings he collects [that] alone, but he tells nothing precise of the deeds of some of them, indeed he did not consider them worthy of mention, since he has set out the number of kings" (De Breucker 2014: F3a).
65. Frahm (1999) suggested that the famous scholar Nabû-zuqup-kēna added a couplet of verses to the twelfth tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to describe the fate of a soldier fallen in battle and left unburied. He would have done so after his king died in such circumstances. George (2003: 49) rejects the idea.
66. Still, there are persistent attempts in ancient Mesopotamian studies to see historical events as the inspiration of literary works. The Babylonian Flood story, for example, has been connected to the invasions of Amorites in the early second millennium (Halla & Simpson 1998: 33) and to the violent reconquest of southern Babylonia under Samsuiluna in the late eighteenth century (Wilcke 1999), while some consider the *Myth of Erra* to have been inspired by events that occurred between 1100 and 850 (Glassner 2004: 26). Such interpretations are debatable, and it is easy to find alternative ones.
67. Glassner 1989 and 1995 give insightful if brief surveys.

## CHAPTER 2. WORD LISTS: A VERY SHORT HISTORY

1. Borges 1975: 101–5.
2. For general surveys on the history of lexicography, see Boisson et al. 1991 and Schaer 1996. For *Erya*, see Coblin 1993 and for *Kitāb al-ʿayn*, Haywood 1978.
3. Landsberger & Civil 1967: 68 line 18.
4. See Tinney 1998 and Veldhuis 1997: 12–83 for schooling in the early second millennium, Gesche 2000 and Veldhuis 2013 for the first millennium.
5. Veldhuis 1997: 28–31 stresses the school context of most lexical manuscripts. Waetzoldt 1986: no. 3 is an example of a poorly written prism. See Glassner 2010: 404 for the Uruk colophon and Schileico 1914/15 for the