

addition to female scribes and scholars Enkheduanna and Nin-shata-pada, Hallo discusses women and their presence in the religious, economic, and political life of Mesopotamia. See also RIVKAN NARIK, "The Female 'Sage' in Mesopotamian Literature (with an Appendix on Egypt)," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, edited by J. G. CAMME AND L. G. PERROT (1990).

Scribal Materials

In GEORGE F. BASS, "Oldest Known Shipwreck Reveals Splendors of the Bronze Age," *National Geographic* 172 (December 1987), both the text and superb photographs record a significant archaeological find. See HEINRICH OTTEN, *Die Bronzetafel aus Bogazköy: Ein Staatsvertrag Tutanchas IV* (1988), for the publication of the bronze treaty tablet mentioned above. C. B. F. WALKER, *Cuneiform* (1987), is a small volume that covers the origin, development, and geographical distribution of cuneiform, the process of its decipherment, scribes and libraries, and the variety of texts produced in cuneiform. D. J. WISEMAN, "Assyrian Writing Boards," *Trag* 17 (1955), presents evidence of the production, use, and organization of this inscriptional medium.

See also **Legal and Social Institutions of Ancient Mesopotamia** (Part 4, Vol. I) and **The Scribes of Ancient Egypt** (Part 9, Vol. III).

The Scribal Process

W. G. LAMBERT, "Ancestors, Authors, and Canoncity," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 11 (1957), is a consideration of the contributions of ancient cuneiform scholars to the literary "canon"; see also ALASPAR LIVINGSTONE, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (1986). A. I. ОРЕНКИН, "The Intellectual in Mesopotamian Society," *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975), discusses the contributions of the scribe to the intellectual history of Mesopotamia and considers the scribe in his roles as bureaucrat, scholar, and poet. In SIMO PAROLA, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (1971), the introductory material of vol. 1 discusses the nature of Mesopotamian science, the responsibilities of the cuneiform scholars, and the relationship of the scholars to the crown. FRANCESCA ROCHBERG-HALTON, "Canoncity in Cuneiform Texts," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 36 (1984), examines evidence for the existence of a native Mesopotamian concept of canon as applied to its literary and scientific texts. Three streams of tradition are defined. The problems are considered in detail with regard to the celestial omen series *Enuma Anu Enlil*. MAXIMILIAN STRÖCK, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergang Ninivehs* (1916), discusses the inscriptions of Assurbanipal from which the excerpt above was quoted.

Sumerian Literature: An Overview

PIOTR MICHALOWSKI

THE OLDEST PRESERVED LITERATURE in the world was written in the Sumerian language. Nine or so generations after the invention of writing early in the third millennium BCE, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia began writing texts that were not administrative in nature but were the product of imagination. Where that literature came from we do not know. It could be maintained that writing preserved a rich oral literature that no doubt existed in Sumer. One could also argue that writing provided a completely different medium of expression, and that from the very beginning the literature of the clay tablets was fundamentally different from the oral compositions that circulated in society. Literacy was always highly restricted in the ancient Near East, and only an elite, scribes as well as government and temple officials—could read and write.

A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Sumerian literature is defined here as literature in the Sumerian language. Most of the texts that we have come from periods when the language was no longer spoken by the population at large but was maintained in the schools and temples. After the Sumerian language died out, most people in Mesopotamia spoke various Semitic lan-

guages and dialects, and literature was composed in literary versions of some of these languages, primarily in Akkadian. Already at the time when writing was invented Sumer was a multicultural and multilingual place, and so it is far to say that Sumerian was always written in a multilingual environment, and that the politics and aesthetics of written language choice are not linked in a simple way with the spoken language of a people or peoples. For this reason, and because for most of its history this literature coexisted with Akkadian, it is difficult to speak of a separate Sumerian literature although for the sake of this introductory essay we do precisely that.

Authors

Most ancient literary works cannot be easily dated. An examination of the script and the writing, or the investigation of the archaeological context, can tell us when a given work was inscribed, but it rarely determines when a text was composed. We know almost nothing about the poets who wrote the literary compositions; authorial anonymity was the rule. The rare exceptions to this are of significance. The earliest poet known by name was Enkheduanna, daughter of King Sargon of Akkad and high priestess of Nanna, the moon-god, in the city of Ur (modern Tell al-Muqayyar). Ancient tradition, probably baseless, ascribed to her three separate poems:

the collection of "Temple Hymns," a hymn to the goddess Inanna, and the autobiographical hymn known as the *Exaltation of Inanna*. It is interesting to note that in a profession dominated by men, the world's first identified poet was a woman. (See "Kings of Akkad: Sargon and Naram-Sin" in Part 5, Vol. II.)

The creative process involved only a small number of people, and their labors were read only by a privileged few. The average man or woman probably knew nothing of the poems and stories that we have recovered from the ground of Mesopotamia, and therefore we should not identify the sentiments and values of the literature with the ideals of all members of those ancient societies.

Form and Style

Tablets. Sumerian literature was written on clay tablets and cylinders of various forms. The early texts were inscribed on large square tablets, with rounded edges, in multiple columns. Shorter exercises and incantations were written on round tablets. Beginning with the Ur-III period, round and multiple-sided prisms, only sporadically attested before, came into general use. Although one can observe a certain local standardization of formats, a variety of forms persisted, often differing according to the level of instruction. Many of the Old Babylonian school exercises were written on rectangular tablets, "long tablets," which contained between fifteen to forty lines of text in single columns on each side. There were also multicolumn tablets that contained two hundred or more lines, but these are less common, and often have inferior versions.

Style. Almost all of Sumerian literature is poetry. There are prose texts—law codes, literary letters, copies of royal inscriptions—but they constitute a small portion of the literature. As far as we know, Sumerian did not use meter and rhyme as its primary poetic devices. The formal study of Sumerian poetics is seriously hampered by our rudimentary knowledge of the phonology of the language, but we can recognize some of the underlying principles.

The dominant form of poetic organization was

syntactic parallelism. Short lines were organized into larger units of two, three, four, or more lines by parallelism of all levels of language. Repetition of units of various sizes was an important element. One of the most well-known Shulgi hymns begins thus:

LUGAL MEN SHATA URSANG MEN
SHUGI MEN BATUDENAVTA NITA KALGA MEN
PIRANG IGI KHUSH USHUMGALÉ TUDA MEN
LUGAL AN UBDA LAMMUBA MEN

King am I, warrior from the womb am I,
Shulgi am I, mighty male from birth am I,
Lion fierce of eye, born to be a dragon am I,
King of the four corners of the universe am I.

Here the repeated use of the verb MEN, "I am," which goes on for another fifteen lines, frames a section of four lines in which synonyms are used to establish a poetic pattern. The repetition of that most important word, LUGAL, Sumerian for "king," frames the section. The fourth line is a standard epithet commonly found in royal inscriptions, as is NITA KALGA, "mighty male," in line two. Here they are introduced as the natural consequences of proper royal birth, which is established in the first line. The parallelism of the word for "king" and the name of Shulgi, with the epithet preceding the proper name, is another typical device found in the opening lines of hymns. Sometimes poets went against the grain in order to make it new, as in the first line of the longest of all Old Babylonian hymns, which began not with an epithet but with the name of Sumner's most important god: "Enlil—his utterance is mighty and his instructions are holy forever!"

Many of these devices are difficult to render in English. For example, in Sumerian the normal possessive construction works on the pattern LUGAL KALAMAK, "king-land-of," that is, "king of the land." In order to stress the second part, a different construction was used: KALAMAK UR-GAR-BI, "land-of—king's," or "of the land—its king." This semantic shift is common in poetic texts and often accounts for the artificial and awkward tone of many modern translations.

The heightened attention to all levels of language provided various motivations for poetic composition. On the lexical level the word lists

were drawn on for a complex vocabulary. Word-plays and the use of synonyms and antonyms were characteristic devices. The phonological level is the most difficult to appreciate since that is the part of the language we know the least about at present, but certain poetic devices are quite obvious even to the modern reader. One extreme example is the *Song of the Hoe*. Since the Sumerian word for a hoe was AL, the text is built around words that contain the syllable "al."

EARLY SUMERIAN TEXTS

Lexical Texts

The earliest writing in the world first appears in the city of Uruk (modern Warka) and dates to approximately 3100. It is assumed, but cannot be proven, that these tablets were written in Sumerian. The earliest texts are economic and administrative in nature. They record the collection and redistribution of various items such as animals, grain, oil, and cloth and the management of personnel by economic institutions such as temples and large households. Very soon a new type of text makes its appearance: the lexical lists. These are lists of words arranged either by theme, such as professions or geographical names, or by the shape of the cuneiform signs. The didactic purpose of these lists is clear: they were the first textbooks of cuneiform, and although it may seem strange to the modern reader, one should perhaps refer to this production as the first written literature. These lexical texts have the longest history of any written genre because they continued to be copied, changed, and composed anew for more than three thousand years. (See the essay "Ancient Mesopotamian Lexicography" later in this section.)

Imaginative Writing

The earliest narrative and poetic texts date to the end of the Early Dynastic period (around 2500), and have been excavated primarily in two ancient cities: Fara (ancient Shuruppak) and Abu Salabikh (ancient name unknown). Smaller finds of literary tablets from this period have been made in such other cities in southern Mesopotamia as Nippur (modern Nuffar), Adab, Uruk,

Girsu (modern Tello), and Ur. They have also been found in Syria: at Mari (Tell Harriri) on the Euphrates and, farther west, at Ebla (modern Tell Marikh).

The scribes of Early Dynastic compositions wrote elements basic to every sentence and the reader was expected to supply the remaining parts from memorized texts. Needless to say, this causes great difficulties for modern scholars, and the only texts that can be well understood are those that survived into later times, in copies made hundreds of years later. Another obstacle to the understanding of the earliest literature was a separate writing convention that was used alongside the standard form. In this type of writing, known as UD.GAL.NUN (the writing for the name of the god Enlil), the same signs as used in the standard system were read differently, and as a majority of these different readings are still unknown to us, we remain in the dark about the meaning of such texts.

Whatever the writing convention, not a single one of these early pieces of literature can be fully translated, although we do understand parts of them to various degrees. A small number of tablets contain magical charms against diseases. One text tells of the adventures of a legendary king, Luglulbanda of Uruk, who, in later times, becomes the subject of two long heroic poems. In another piece, a king gives proverbial advice to his son.

Most texts from the early period, however, treat mythological subjects. Some of these begin with cosmological introductions: "After the heavens were separated from the earth, after the earth was separated from the heavens," or, "In those ancient days it was, in those ancient nights it was, in those ancient years, in those ancient years it was." One litany of short hymns to the major deities of Sumer begins with a longer invocation to the main god of the land, Enlil.

O city that grows to the heavens, O (city) Nippur, Bond of the Heavens and the Earth, O Enlil, lord Nunamir, lord whose command is unalterable . . . Enlil established his seed on the earth, and uttered the praises of the great gods.

The world slowly comes into being and is reshaped by divinities, as when Enlil takes matters into his own hands and personally separates earth from the sky. The gods of Sumer build

temples, make love, and have children. Generations follow each other, grow up, and have their own adventures.

Although there is much that we do not understand, we can ascertain that, but for one very important text, the earliest Mesopotamian literary works were written in the Sumerian language. The one exception is a hymn to the sun-god, found in two versions: one from Shuruppak and one from the Syrian city of Ebla. This hymn was written in a Semitic language, perhaps in an early dialect of Akkadian, and is but a signal of another literature that still awaits discovery.

At Ebla there is a handful of other literary compositions in at least two Semitic languages or dialects; there can be no doubt that there were other such writings throughout the ancient Near East. One of the important discoveries of the last few decades has been the unearthing of third-millennium writing and the discovery of the wide spread of literature at that time. Although this vast area was politically fragmented and power resided in locally centered city-states, strong economic and cultural contacts resulted in many common features, and the use of a common writing system, with a shared school curriculum, was an important aspect of the culture of the time. No matter what dialect was spoken locally, the bureaucrats learned Sumerian and other written languages throughout Mesopotamia and Syria, and perhaps in other places. The common literary tradition was one element of this shared bureaucratic culture.

The Agade and Ur III Periods

Around the year 2300, Mesopotamia was united under the rule of one city and one dynasty, centered around the as-yet-undiscovered capital of Agade (Akkade, Akkad). Sargon, the founder of the Akkadian dynasty, and his successors ruled the land for slightly more than a century (2334-2154). This unprecedented centralization of power in Mesopotamia required a whole new propaganda apparatus: scribes were centrally trained and sent out to the provinces to run the local bureaucracies. Although one suspects that a whole new literature was created at this time, much of it in the Akkadian language, very little of it has survived.

After the fall of Sargon's empire and the ensuing disorder, a new government was able to domi-

nate Mesopotamia from the city of Ur. The Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III) ruled the land for 109 years (2112-2004). Its five kings—Ur-Namma (Ur-Nammu), Shulgi, Amar-Sin, Shu-Sin, and Ibbi-Sin—were celebrated in Sumerian poetry.

Although we have found only a small number of literary texts from the period, the songs and poems from the court and temples of Ur were adapted and recopied by later generations of scribes, and therefore we have access to some of these compositions.

One should also mention the *Gudea Cylinders*, the combined texts of which provide the longest and most complex surviving early Sumerian literary work. Gudea was a ruler of the state of Lagash, who was contemporary with the first years of the Ur III Empire. The poem, inscribed on two large clay cylinders, describes how Ningirsu, the titular deity of Lagash, appeared to the king in a dream and commanded him to build the Eninnu, his temple, in the capital city of Girsu (modern Tello). The main portion of the text describes in great detail the fulfillment of that task, and is a source of much information on building techniques and on ritual practices of the time. The *Cylinders* are unique, and as far as we know, the poem never entered the school curriculum nor was it read again by future generations.

THE OLD BABYLONIAN CURRICULUM

The widest variety of Sumerian literary compositions is found in the Old Babylonian period, from the eighteenth century, when Sumerian was certainly no longer a living language. (See the next essay in this volume "Akkadian Literature: An Overview.") The best-known texts from this period were retrieved from the private houses of the cities of Nippur and Ur, although smaller finds have been made in other southern Mesopotamian cities, in Isin, Uruk, Larsa (modern Tell Senkereh), and elsewhere. As far as we know, there were no temple or private libraries in the south during this time. A different mixture of texts comes from the north of Babylonia, from cities such as Sippar (modern Abn Habba), Babylon, and Kish (modern Tell al-Uhaimi). Many

literary pieces that are preserved in museums are of unknown origin.

Southern Babylonia

By far the largest number and the best-known of the texts are those from Nippur. As is the case with most southern literary texts of this period, the surviving tablets represent the curriculum of the scribal schools. All evidence seems to indicate that we have recovered the major part of the Old Babylonian school curriculum from the time of King Samsu-iluna of Babylon (1749-1712 BCE), when Nippur was abandoned for a few hundred years, and the exercises of the last two or three generations of pupils were preserved. We can retrace the steps that a schoolboy took on the road to literacy, and literature was a vital component of these studies. Schooling prepared the aspiring clerks and bureaucrats for membership in, and service to, the elite ranks of the state. The literature that they learned and recopied on clay was part of the indoctrination process.

Although there seems to have been a fairly uniform curriculum of instruction in Old Babylonian times, in the south at least, education was not controlled by the state. Most probably, instruction took place in the houses of scribes and priests, who taught their own sons together with other neighborhood children. Literary texts such as *Schooldays* describe the learning environment of an institution called the *EDUBA* (EDUBA, or "school," but it is quite possible that these are idealized representations and not realistic descriptions of Old Babylonian scribal education.

Classification: Ancient and Modern. Since the southern literature of the Old Babylonian period has been recovered to a large degree, a brief survey of its contents may best illustrate its range. We assign names such as hymn or epic to categories of text, but the reader should keep in mind that these designations are modern. The same is true of the titles of texts: the Mesopotamians usually referred to texts only by quoting all or part of a composition's first line. Indeed, the modern generic classification of Sumerian texts is a matter of intense debate that has yet to be resolved. As there are no native classifica-

tions to help us, we are forced to rely on Western schemes for the organization of texts, although one is always aware that these categories may be totally inappropriate for an ancient literature. Without descriptive labels it would be impossible to discuss the texts, and therefore the labels that we use are necessary, even if they are only heuristic devices that should not be taken too seriously. The ancient scribes left no system of their own, although some texts have subscripts that may indicate some of their thinking on the matter, even if we sometimes fail to recover a full consistency of usage.

There is an Early Dynastic collection of short hymns to deities from Abu Salabikh in which each section ends with "To divine so-and-so, let praise be!" Such endings are quite common in a variety of texts from later times, including hymns, epic tales, and other compositions. The expression "let praise be" (Sumerian *za.mf*) was even borrowed by Akkadian as *sammû*; it clearly was thought to characterize certain texts. Yet, we would never group together the wide variety of compositions that end in this manner, and it is not at all certain that the ancients considered them to belong to one class.

Other endings are easier to understand, and seem to refer to an accompanying instrument, as in *En.SEM.MA*, "lament of the *shem* instrument," or *BALAG*, "(song of) the *balag* drum." There are also other descriptive phrases, such as *SH.GIDA*, "long song," or *En.SA.HUN.GA*, "lament to pacify the heart (of an angry god)." Some subscripts such as *KA.MIM.MA* used at the end of incantations, or *ADAB* and *TIGI*, types of hymns named after musical instruments, have predictable structural organization and are used in ways that conform to our expectations. Others, such as *SH.NAM.SUN*, are used for a variety of texts that we would not have gathered under a single label. The law codes provide a characteristic example.

There are three such Sumerian "codes," all of which antedate the famous Hammurabi (1792-1750) stela. All three are preserved in school copies. They were structured as royal inscriptions and were designed to be written on stone stela for public display. None is completely preserved. All three probably began with a historical introduction, followed by a long section of legal provisions, and then by an epilogue that

included standard courses found in other monumental inscriptions. To the modern reader the term "legal code" invokes the concepts of prescriptive law and sanction, and of statutory law that has practical application in the courts. There is absolutely no evidence that these "codes" had any practical judicial function. They must be treated as abstract demonstrations of royal wisdom and justice, together with the hymns and other examples of the literature of the court.

Court Literature

Most of the texts that were adapted to school use in Old Babylonian times had been written much earlier. The process of sifting through and selecting materials for preservation was as important as the composition of new texts, and therefore a good portion of the literature concerned the earlier rulers of Mesopotamia. The roots of the central Sumerian Old Babylonian school tradition go back to the Ur III period. Shulgi, the second king and great consolidator of the dynasty, initiated a number of political, bureaucratic, and military reforms. In connection with these structural changes, he also probably restructured much of the school curriculum. He was one of the few Mesopotamian kings who claimed to be able to read and write. In one royal hymn he asserts: "Since I was a child I (studied in) the school. I learned the scribe art from the tablets of Sumner and Akkad, (and) among the children no one could write a tablet like I could!" (See the essay "Shulgi of Ur: King of a Neo-Sumerian Empire," in Part 5, Vol. II.)

It is impossible to evaluate the veracity of such statements, but it does seem that Shulgi and his successors paid particular attention to the use of Sumerian literature as cultural and political propaganda. We only have a handful of original literary pieces from the period, but one can see the effects of this royal patronage in the later tradition, which is built around works connected with the Ur III kings. The numerous royal hymns are the most obvious survival, but one can also point to the "debates," some of which include references to performance at the court of Ur: the love songs of King Shu-Sin; the *Curse of Agade*, which describes the fall of the earlier major state in Mesopotamia and was written in Ur-III times; the "law code" of Ur-Namma; and

even a fragmentary text that may be a lullaby written for a son of Shulgi.

There are reasons to believe that the heroic tales of the legendary kings of Early Dynastic Uruk—Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh—may have been composed at this time. The Ur III kings came from Uruk and the queen mother maintained her palace there throughout much of the reign of the dynasty. The commemoration of these illustrious ancestors constituted part of the foundation myth of the royal family, and Shulgi repeatedly mentions his connections with his divine "brother," Gilgamesh. This legendary ruler of Uruk was the son of King Lugalbanda and the goddess Ninsun; after his death he became a judge in the Netherworld. During the middle of his reign, Shulgi resurrected a tradition first introduced by the Akkadian king Naram-Sin, and proclaimed himself divine. The descent from Gilgamesh thus provided an important element of the ideology of divine kingship; therefore, it is not surprising to find allusions to the court of Ur in some of the Gilgamesh compositions.

Other historical or historiographic texts were also studied and recopied by aspiring Old Babylonian scribes, including the Sumerian Kinglist, a tendentious and partially fictive list of dynasties from successive cities that supposedly ruled Mesopotamia since before the Flood, and the *Curse of Agade*, mentioned above.

The literary biographies of ancient kings, if one might call them that, were molded into specific patterns that contrasted certain views of kingship and human destiny. A short poem, *The Ballad of Heroes of Old*, which is known from Old Babylonian and later sources, summarized the ambivalent Mesopotamian attitude toward fame and historical achievement. Asking where were the heroic kings of legend, such as Gilgamesh, the poet seeks but one happy day of life and proposes to find solace in the domain of the beer goddess. A small number of short compositions on similar themes, one of which begins "nothing is (better) than the sweet life," were copied alongside the *Ballad*.

Hymnic Literature

The life of kings was filled with ritual and ceremony. Hymnic texts were composed for these

occasions, and many of them were preserved by later generations. Ur-Namma, the first king of the Ur III dynasty, was one of the few Mesopotamian kings who was killed in battle. This was such an unusual occurrence that a long poem was composed to commemorate this sad and ominous event. His son Shulgi, one of the most famous rulers of early Mesopotamia, was celebrated in more than twenty-four royal hymns; a selection of his letters was excerpted for school use. The last king of Ur, Ibbi-Sin, was the subject of hymns, but as the kingdom deteriorated and fell during his reign, he was primarily remembered through a selection of possibly fictive letters that detailed the process of disintegration of the state, and in a long poetic lament that described the fall of Sumer and the capture of the king by enemies from Iran (*The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*).

In the centuries that followed, kings of the succeeding dynasties of Isin, Larsa, Uruk, and Babylon commissioned similar royal hymns, right up to the last years of the Old Babylonian period, as more than 130 of them are known. None of them was more fervent than Ishme-Dagan, who reigned at Isin more than a century after Shulgi and who patterned his numerous royal hymns after the achievements of his predecessor. Poetic laments similar to the one described above were written during his reign.

The royal hymns are closely related to hymns to deities. Since many of the former are actually hymns to gods or goddesses addressed by or on behalf of kings, it is often difficult to make a distinction between the two categories. There are more than 120 divine hymns known at present. Most of the major gods and goddesses of the pantheon were so honored; in each case the author treated the deity as if he or she were one of the most important in the universe. There is also a smaller category of hymns extolling temples and the deities worshiped within them. Best known are a series of short hymns to the temples of Sumer and Akkad (the *Temple Hymns*); the *Hymn to the Ekur*, the temple of Enlil in Nippur, which was the major cult center of Sumer; and the *Kesh Temple Hymn*, which is already attested among the Early Dynastic texts from Abu Salabikh.

Personal lyrical poetry is absent in Sumerian literature. This is partly a function of the public

nature of the texts we have at our disposal. Intimacy and public spectacle were often combined, as in the hymns that celebrated union between King Shu-Sin and his wife Kubatum. There are a number of short poems concerning the doomed love affair of the goddess Inanna and the divine shepherd Dumuzi that could be considered lyrical poems. They are often couched in dialogue form, with the two lovers exchanging highly erotic speeches. In these texts, date syrup, lettuce, and beer all serve as metaphors that are charged with sexual meaning. These erotic, sometimes playful, often humorous poems have a darker side, as they cannot be separated from other compositions such as *Dumuzi's Dream*, *Inanna's Descent*, and *Danu in the Netherworld*, which describe the betrayal and death of Dumuzi, Inanna's lover.

All of these poems concern kings and queens, gods and goddesses. Private individuals rarely make their appearance in Sumerian literature, and when they do, we do not know if they celebrated real individuals or idealized figures. Such is the case with two elegies that commemorate the death of Nannamu and Nawritum, the parents of one Ludingira, who had ventured to a foreign land and had been summoned back to his ailing father's side. Quite different in tone is a highly metaphorical poem, in which another Ludingira—the name ("Man of a god") may be the Sumerian equivalent of "Everyman," albeit of high status—sends a messenger to his mother, Shale-Eshlar, in Nippur, and provides him with a series of descriptions by which he may recognize the woman. The son spares nothing in his praise and tells the envoy that "my mother is like a bright star of the horizon, a doe in the mountains, a morning star (shining even) at noon, a precious jewel of) carnelian, a topaz from (the land of) Markhashi."

Mythmaking

There was a smaller group of narrative poems concerning deities that might be called myths. Although they differ from each other in story line and in cast of characters, many of them share a common theme: the problem of order and disorder in the universe. Typically, they begin with an anomalous situation in which the order of the world is either disturbed, as when the mythical

Anzu (or Zu) bird stole the Tablets of Destinies, or is not fully established, as in *Enki and the World Order*, which describes the creation of the cosmos and its allotment to individual gods. The action of the text leads to the reinstatement of order, or in the establishment of proper control under the rule of the hierarchy of deities. The mythological tales differ in detail and often present contradictory narratives. There are, to provide one salient example, two contemporaneous narratives that describe completely different stories of the courtship and marriage of Enlil, god of Nippur and of all Sumner, and the goddess Ninlil (*Enlil and Ninlil, I and II*). The two versions were undoubtedly read by the same eyes, at least in the Old Babylonian period, but it is characteristic of the culture that the contradictory narratives were not harmonized. Other texts seem to provide etiological explanations of the origin of culturally important elements such as fire (*Inanna and the Numan-Plant*) and grain (*How Grain Came to Sumner*).

Although there were hundreds of deities in the Sumnerian pantheon, each city was presided over by a specific god or goddess, who dwelt in the central shrine of the town. On certain sacred occasions they would visit each other, and their statues were ceremoniously transported by boat to neighboring cities. There are mythological accounts of such visits, narrated in poetic form (for example, *Enki's Journey to Nippur* or *Nanna's Journey to Nippur*).

A myth that has attracted much contemporary attention is *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*; it serves as a good example of the kind of narrative one encounters in these myths. Inanna, who dwells in the heavens as goddess of war and carnal love, impetuously sets out for the Netherworld, the domain of her sister Ereshkigal. As she passes each of the Netherworld's seven gates, she is made to give up one item of her clothing or jewelry, each representing one aspect of her power. She reaches the Netherworld's core bereft of clothing, hence powerless, a sack of skin hung out to dry. Her return to the land of the living depends on finding a god to take her place in the Netherworld. Inanna searches among the gods but can locate only Dumuzi, her lover. After vainly trying to escape Dumuzi, her lover, Dumuzi is captured by demons and

dragged to the Netherworld. There are variant recensions to the end of the tale as well as separate tales about Dumuzi's capture (*Dumuzi's Dream* and *Dumu in the Netherworld*).

The sense of order is central to all Sumnerian literature, and even if it is most explicitly set out in the myths, it is to be found in almost every kind of composition. Most characteristically, it is expressed by the notion of *me*, a Sumnerian word that is notoriously difficult to pin down. It denotes the proper way of being in the world. It can apply to things and to actions, particularly to rites, as they must be done in the exact proper fashion. The *mes* are, in turn, closely connected to a Tablet of Destinies, which could not be altered even by the gods. The *mes* and the Tablet of Destinies (that is, the physical embodiments of destiny) had their proper place, and anything written about the effects of their displacement. In one such text (*Inanna and Enki*) it is Inanna who steals the *mes* from Enki; in another, the lion-headed eagle Anzu flies off with the Tablet. The return of the *mes* and the Tablet is the stuff of the ensuing narratives and of the new reality that is created as order is restored to the universe.

This same sense of proper balance is found in other parts of Sumnerian literature. While most royal texts extol the might and wisdom of the king and celebrate the institution of kingship, others appear to do quite the opposite. The poem of the death of Ur-Namma, the literary letters concerning the last days of the house of Ur, and the *Curse of Agade* and the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumner and Ur*, which describe in vivid language the fall of the empires of Sargon and Shulgi, all seem to go against the tendency to praise kings and their states. Seen in context however, these sad tales of the deaths of kings serve to delimit the boundaries of royal power and to establish the proper semantic definition of kingship. Since even the gods themselves were beholden to an abstract notion of destiny and order, nothing less could be expected of kings, even if some of them were considered divine.

Other Literary Forms

Among the other texts that were studied in the Old Babylonian schools were more than twenty

collections of short proverbial stories and sayings, and a much smaller group of riddles. The young scribes also studied collections of older letters. Although normal correspondence by this time was carried on in Akkadian, around forty Sumnerian letters were preserved among the literary texts. The largest group originated, if we are to take them at face value, in the chancellery of the Ur III kings; a smaller group was ascribed to kings of the succeeding dynasty of Isin. In addition, there were miscellaneous letters and a few odd items such as a public announcement of the loss of an inscribed cylinder seal and a copy of an old votive inscription. We have no way of establishing which, if any, of these older royal letters were authentic; their language and written style were certainly modernized in Old Babylonian times, but it is also possible that some, if not all, of them were written as school exercises.

These elaborate Sumnerian letters gave way to a new genre—the poetic letter of petition, sometimes referred to as letter-prayers. These prayers and petitions to gods and kings, addressed as if they were letters, were deposited before statues with the hope that they would be answered. We have three Akkadian letters from the period, addressed from a goddess to the chief administrator of her temple. It is possible that this represents one of the ways in which the deities answered letters of petition. One of the most elaborate of these was addressed by Ninshapada, high priestess in the city of Durum and daughter of King Sin-kashid of Uruk, to Rim-Sin (1822–1763), the king of Larsa who had conquered her city.

Among the major textual types, one must refer to the debate poems in which idealized characters such as Sumner and Winter, Silver and Copper, or Cattle and Grain, exchange self-praise, insults, and taunts. These compositions are an invaluable source of information on the formal attitudes of the Mesopotamian poets toward their culture and the world that surrounded them.

Another important category of texts was the incantation, or magical charm. These were recited to help heal sick persons; to purify cultic objects; to ward off evil demons, pests, and dangerous animals; or to undo the effects of bad

omens. Because of their complex poetic tone and rich metaphorical imagery, these compositions led a double life: they were used in rituals and also copied in the schools as literary examples. Such incantations are already found among the Early Dynastic texts from Abu Salabikh and Ebla and were copied or created down to the very end of Mesopotamian culture. From there, they came into the literature of Diaspora Jews living in Babylonia.

LITERATURE IN NORTHERN BABYLONIA

In contrast with the southern Mesopotamian cities, the northern ones such as Babylon, Sippar, and Kish were not abandoned during the eighteenth century, but continued to be parts of the Old Babylonian kingdom until its end in 1595. There is some evidence that their populations expanded with the influx of people from the south. Many Sumnerian literary tablets from the north have survived, albeit few are from modern controlled excavations, and therefore we know little about their origin. From the published materials it would appear that texts from north and south differed substantially. In contrast to the wide variety of texts known from the Nippur schools, in the north we have primarily Sumnerian compositions that were used in cultic settings. Texts such as laments, hymns, and prayers dominate, and although there are also examples of compositions known also from the south, we often find substantial differences when comparing these versions.

Two characteristics stand out from among the northern materials: syllabic spellings and the use of a literary dialect of Sumnerian known as EME.SAL. Of necessity, EME.SAL texts often used the syllabic orthography, so the two phenomena are related. Syllabic spellings were used to indicate more exactly the pronunciation of words. Thus, the word *cau* (*big*) would normally be written with one cuneiform character, but in this orthography it could be expressed by a sequence of two signs: "ga" + "al." The EME.SAL dialect differed in pronunciation from the main Sumnerian literary tongue. For example, in this dialect,

the god Enki was Amanki. The term *EME-SAL* means literally "thin tongue" and it may have referred to the way in which these texts were pronounced aloud. It was reserved for texts used in the liturgy by a special caste of priests who were called in Sumerian *GAL* (Akkadian *kaldū*), and for the direct speech of women or goddesses in other literary compositions. In the past, this was sometimes translated as "women's tongue," but there is no basis for this rendering. (See also "Ancient Mesopotamian Lexicography" later in this section.)

These features are also found in certain southern texts, but they are not as common as in those from the north. The differences in the literatures of the two regions may be explained in a variety of ways. One may posit that the predominance of liturgical texts in the north was a result of the abandonment of the south; as priests migrated upstream, they may have been forced to commit to clay the liturgy that had hitherto been transmitted from generation to generation mainly by oral means. The disruption of the normal workings of apprenticeship and of the passing down of tradition from generation to generation may have pressured them to write texts down and to assure proper pronunciation by more extensive use of syllabic writings.

SUMERIAN LITERATURE AFTER THE OLD BABYLONIAN PERIOD

After the end of the Old Babylonian period, we have hardly any Mesopotamian literary texts for close to three hundred years. This may be due to accident of discovery, to unknown social and historical forces, or to both. By this time the cuneiform script and written forms of the Akkadian language were in use throughout western Asia, and therefore we can study Mesopotamian literature from texts that were used in the Hittite capital of Khattusha (modern Bogazköy) in Anatolia, in Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra) on the Syrian coast, in Emar farther inland in Syria, and even in Egypt. The creative effort was now clearly centered around literature in the Akkadian language, but selected Sumerian texts remained in circulation. Lexical texts, crucial for teaching the cuneiform script, were retained, as

were many incantations, prayers, and liturgical compositions. A small number of myths and other kinds of texts continued to be studied and copied. Most conspicuously, however, the core legacy of the Ur III tradition—the royal hymns, epics, and other historiographic compositions—were no longer part of the written tradition.

The end of the second and the whole of the first millennium were times of ordering and restructuring of the literature of Mesopotamia. The temple and palace scribes of Assyria and Babylonia collected and edited the rich literary legacy of the land. By then there were hardly any monolingual Sumerian texts; bilingual versions were the norm, and standardization was the rule. In the restructuring of the literary corpus, many older Sumerian compositions were discarded, and those that were preserved were supplied with Akkadian translations. The most common format of bilingual texts was interlinear; that is, each Sumerian line was followed by a rather literal translation, sometimes indented and written in a smaller hand. There were also other ways of doing this: a line could be divided in half and the Akkadian translation was inserted in the middle, often bounded by small double cuneiform wedges that resemble our own quotation marks. Very few monolingual Sumerian texts are found from the later periods, and these are primarily incantations. It was also not standard practice to circulate the Akkadian translations without the Sumerian originals, and only a handful of such one-language examples are known.

There remained regional differences, and we often find that redactions differed in details between scribal centers. The owners and directors of private, temple, and palace libraries went to great pains to create authoritative redactions of individual compositions, often collating manuscripts from different cities in order to establish a complete text. The best-known efforts at such standardization were undoubtedly those carried out by the scribes who compiled the Nineveh libraries of Assurbanipal (668–627), one of the last kings of Assyria. Since the libraries were destroyed soon after his reign, when Nineveh was sacked, the tablets that were collected there had a larger impact on modern scholarship than they had on knowledge in antiquity.

MESOPOTAMIA UNDER FOREIGN RULE

The political end of Assyria around 614 and of Babylonia a century later did not put an end to Mesopotamian literature; the complex cultures of the land outlasted the state structures. Scholars continued their redactional activities under the Persian, Seleucid, and Parthian kings, primarily in the cities of Uruk and Babylon. Many of the Sumerian and bilingual texts from Babylon, some of which were copied into the first century BCE, were liturgical songs that were the domain of the lamentation priests and were found in the private collections of priestly families. Priests and rich individuals copied or commissioned the copying of literary texts for deposition as devotional objects in temples. Certain texts were explicitly copied "for singing" during various festivals, ceremonies, and rituals, and some bore additional notations to guide musical performance. There can be no doubt that only the Sumerian was pronounced aloud, and that the Akkadian translations, probably equally foreign by this time, were transmitted only by the requirements of tradition.

Mesopotamian literature survived into later times. The last known dated cuneiform tablet is an astronomical text from 75 CE Babylon. There may be later texts however. There is a handful of literary exercises, including Sumerian magical charms, that have cuneiform on one side and phonetic Greek transcriptions on the other. It has been suggested recently that these may date as late as the second century, and are but a small indication of the survival of Mesopotamian traditions into late antiquity.

This most ancient of all literatures was read and recopied by scribes throughout the Near East for almost three thousand years. The recovery of this intellectual achievement is one of the great scholarly adventures of our time, and we are only now beginning to appreciate the richness of the universal legacy that the Mesopotamian scribes unknowingly left us. By chance, they wrote on clay, a material that has proved more durable than bronze, paper, or papyrus. Because texts were recopied for generations, many literary compositions have been preserved in more than one copy, and therefore we can

restore broken tablets with the preserved portions of duplicate copies. The unexcavated mounds of the Near East and the neglected storerooms of modern museums provide, and will continue to provide, new cuneiform tablets containing works of literature, and therefore the history of Sumerian literature is constantly being revised as new materials become available.

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